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Motherland of invention

Sonoma County residents taking problems, challenges, and some tinkering, to becoming a patent leader



Pained by her daughter's frustration with tying shoes, Wendy Welling of Santa Rosa invented "Tie buddies" to help children with the task. (Photo by - Scott Manchester)

By MICHAEL COIT
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Inventing a new product can be as simple as tying your shoes.

In other words, it's darn hard the first time you do it.

For Wendy Welling, a first-time inventor from Santa Rosa, inspiration came one day while watching her daughter struggle to tie her shoelaces.

She envisioned a gadget that would simplify the task. Tinkering with household items to test her idea, Welling came up with a product she dubs Tie Buddies.

The colorful plastic devices help small hands make snug knots. Eleven months later, she has trademarked the name, a patent is on the way and Welling is beginning to sell Tie Buddies on the Internet and at retail stores.

"This is my baby. That's the thing about it that's so satisfying to me," she said. "You feel really proud and solid and it's something you've done on your own."

Sonoma County has become a hub for people like Welling, entrepreneurs who dream of building something that will change the world, or least bring in a little cash.

The number of patents issued to local inventors has doubled since 1998, reaching 416 in 2006. For the past three years, Sonoma County has generated more patents, per person, than California as a whole.

"That's one way to show innovation in the region. It's pretty strong and getting stronger," said Ben Stone, executive director of the Sonoma County Economic Development Board.

Much of the innovation occurs within local companies seeking to develop and improve products, such as high-tech businesses and food producers. But many inventors are creating products outside the cubicles of corporate Sonoma County, working in their garages and kitchens to transform their ideas into commercial products. And some, like Welling, just stumble upon an idea and are compelled to explore their full potential.

Many local entrepreneurs turn to the Sawyer Center in Santa Rosa for help. The center, part of the Redwood Empire Small Business Development Center, offers seminars and counseling in patents, trademarks, business plan development, financing, developing and launching products.

"It all starts small, with an idea. You never know where they're going to end up," said Steve Schneider, the Sawyer Center's coordinator.

Maybe a dozen or so of the hundreds of ideas presented to Schneider each year reach the marketplace. Tie Buddies is one.

"She's got this simple little product and I think it's a winner," Schneider said.

Welling didn't set out to invent anything. The former marketing professional for large companies was working at home as a consultant when the idea came to her in January.

Tie Buddies was invented out of necessity, she said.

Sloane, her oldest daughter, didn't learn how to tie her shoes until age 7. Tie Buddies made the difference.

"She would get really frustrated with the big loops. You cross them and you go, 'Oh my gosh, where do I put this,' " Welling recalled. "She would just get mad and say, 'I don't want to do this anymore.' "

Her younger daughter, Peyton, had a far shorter learning curve thanks to Tie Buddies and can tie shoes on her own at 5.

Those milestones came earlier this year after Welling experimented with clamps, beads and other household items. By threading the shoelaces through a pair of pull-tabs, she found her daughter could tie her shoes without making messy loops.

Then she made a prototype, working with a company in Kokomo, Ind., that specializes in plastic molds. That was the first of many searches for a skilled hand to help make her idea a reality.

"I think there's so many people who have ideas, but have no idea where to start and so they just don't," Welling said. "I knew it would work."

But first Welling needed to do some "guerilla research" to determine if young children could and would use them and what parents and teachers thought about the shoe-tying aids. Over two months, Welling tried them on kindergarten and preschool classmates of her daughters.

"I also got feedback on the graphics and the colors," she said. "The graphics are so important. They can make up their own stories so they can literally remember the steps."

Polling boys and girls and reading through children's magazines, Welling decided on a fairy and a wand with a fuchsia background for girls and race cars on a Baltic blue background for boys.

Dinosaurs, cats and dogs and other characters are in the works.

To find her illustrator, Welling went to a Web site with references to professionals in the creative arts.

Next, she needed to find a company to make the Tie Buddies. Researching plastic types, including density and quality, Welling came across Wright Engineered Plastics and picked the Santa Rosa company.

"I'd rather give local business a boost," she said.

Cost, however, remains her paramount concern as a startup enterprise. Wright Engineered Plastics offered Welling a

competitive deal, she said.

So far, Welling has spent nearly \$30,000, tapping savings and relying on some family funding. Major expenses include the patent application, the pre-production mold and fixtures for the graphics, packaging set-up fees and graphic design fees.

Tie Buddies have been coming off the Santa Rosa manufacturing line the past month. They are packaged in sets of four by a company in Gridley, north of Sacramento.

The first sales have been through the Tie Buddies Web site. Welling expects online to account for about one-fourth of sales. A set of four sells for \$9.95.

Welling is just beginning to get Tie Buddies into stores locally and plans to expand into other regions.

"The first time I showed it to a store, I was nervous. You have your own vision for it, but it's just that first time you walk in and you feel, oh my gosh," she said.

The store was Bears, Buddies & Toys, in Rohnert Park. The owner, Teresa Maushardt, purchased a case, saying the Tie Buddies fit among the store's educational items.

"It gives children independence. We have all these books out there about how to tie your shoes, but it's so hard with their little fingers. With these Tie Buddies, you just put one under the other and pull," Maushardt said.

Carrying a locally made product was another attraction.

"I'm very excited about what she has and I'm very excited about working with local people," Maushardt said.

Based on initial sales projections, Welling started with a production run of 25,000 and expects to order another 75,000 by the end of the year.

Before that move, however, she must obtain a larger, sturdier mold to produce a greater volume in a shorter time. In turn, Welling will lower production costs.

"I figured I wanted enough to carry me through the soft launch. But then I have to ramp up pretty quickly," Welling said.

Based on initial quotes, the new mold would cost from \$1,700 to \$29,000. Manufacturers in China offer the best deals, but that isn't the only consideration, she said.

"I'd love to stay in the U.S. and local. The 'Made in the USA' thing, as a mom and a parent, that is big for me. Especially after seeing all the toy recalls," she said, referring to toys manufactured in China for U.S. companies.

Expansion also means Welling must develop a small sales force to reach other regions and line up a company to handle storage and shipping. She also is looking at licensing agreements to put cartoon characters on Tie Buddies.

"I want it to grow, but I want controlled growth," she said.

You can reach Staff Writer

Michael Coit at 521-5470 or mike.coit@pressdemocrat.com.

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