

Just go with it

THESE INVENTORS HAD THE CONFIDENCE OF THEIR CONVICTIONS

By Melody Wren

THE WORD INVENTOR conjures visions of mad scientists wearing lab coats and large horn-rimmed glasses, hunched over steaming beakers filled with green liquid. It may also bring to mind the individuals who bravely present their concepts to the hard-nosed panel on CBC television's *The Dragons' Den*.

But many of today's inventors are just forward-thinking women who have unique ideas and run with them.

What would we do without women inventors? Barbie Doll, Spanx hosiery and the

Jasmin Hoffer heads Energrow, a company that sells systems for pressing and filtering oil seeds.

Photography • May Garcia



latest shades of OPI nail polish were all created by women, not to mention windshield wipers, liquid paper, the chocolate chip cookie, disposable diapers, and the Snugli baby carrier.

Some ideas came from recognizing a gap in the market that needs to be filled; others



Photography • David Unrau

used an existing product as a spring board. Here are examples of what local women have been up to.

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Jasmin Hoffer credits her father, Ernst, with the idea of building an oil-pressing system for their dairy farm. The inspiration came from a visit to Europe where they learned that straight soybean oil could be used as a diesel fuel. It saved them a significant amount of money and generated a lot of interest among local farmers.

That's when it really "clicked" for Jasmin, who is based in Newton. She realized the value one of these machines offers a farmer

Making it happen

So you have the next great idea. How can you take it from doodles on a piece of paper to the shelves of stores nationwide? Here is what our inventors have to say:

- Diva Cup co-creator Francine Chambers: "Go and find every single expert in all areas, marketing, sales, etc. Get linked up with those experts to find out the legal ramifications, and find out if you have enough resources to pull it all off."

- Sherrene Kevan, Bird Song Bytes: "Send ideas to a patent lawyer so that a proper patent search can be done. Investigate how much money needs to be invested to get the idea protected, and any other fees that you

may not have planned on. A market study would be valuable to insure the idea doesn't already exist, to know what you are up against, and to get an idea of the market. It's very exciting to bring something to market, especially if you can protect it. Just make sure that it is worth it financially."

- Karem Kalin, Smiles Made Easy: "I would say to go for it, but (and there is a but) don't expect it to be easy or happen quickly. It will take longer and take much more time and work than you first imagine. My philosophy or advice is that it is better to have tried and failed than not to have tried at all."

- Donna Kotosopolous, Little Counters: "Think about possible collaborations that can enhance the service or product. For

example, our program is jointly developed by two complementary levels of expertise—mathematics education and developmental psychology.

"Thus, the potential impact is amplified. Additionally, we collaborate with local libraries to make the program accessible to the public without cost to the public. Be prepared to face many disappointments before the idea or product takes off."

- Jasmin Hoffer, Energrow: "Never stop networking and build a strong team to bring your product out to market. My life motto stems from what Emerson once said: 'Always do what you are afraid to do.' By doing this you can develop your product originality, innovation and independence."

– the idea that “every farmer should have one.” Jasmine invented a small-scale mechanical screw press that converts raw soybeans into fuel-grade vegetable oil, making it an affordable solution for family farms that want to cut costs in an environmentally friendly way.

The product was launched in 2008 under the company name Energrow. A lot of the work came from on-farm demonstrations that allowed farmers to play with the machines, and provide input on design and usability. After reviewing a number of seemingly durable press designs, they were able to understand their flaws and improve on them to build a system that suited the real needs.

From research and development prototypes to working with local manufacturers to create the parts, they have built strong relationships locally with suppliers and customers. Energrow doesn't just sell the farmer an oil press, it also offers complete systems for pressing and filtering many oilseeds such as soy and canola.

Energrow is available mainly in Ontario, but Hoffer says other provinces and countries are showing significant interest. www.energrow.ca.



Karem Kalin of Kitchener developed Smiles Made Easy to help people connect



Smiles Made Easy boxes and cards (above) were invented by Karem Kalin.

and say things that don't often get said in today's busy world.

Raised in Strathroy, Kalin has always been a note writer, leaving short love notes for her husband and “just because” notes for family and friends. She wanted to make it fun and easy for others to do the same.

“Too often we think we need to buy someone the perfect material gift when what we really need to do is tell them ▶



Got what it takes?

Many of us come up with ideas while out for a walk, having a shower or brainstorming with friends. What sets these women apart? They found out how to make it happen with attitude, determination and perseverance.

- “Get it done” is the motto of Little Counters creator Donna Kotsopoulos. “Our ideas do not ruminate indefinitely. We act upon them and we actively seek partners to realize our ideas. We also have the determination not to give up in adversity. We do not drag our feet when our minds are set on an objective. We will try our best to explore all possible options as well as other creative ways to accomplish our objectives.”

- For Energrow's Jasmin Hoffer, “knowing that our products do make a significant difference is a great motivator.” She also admits to having a passion for the things she loves to do. “I not only want to be good at what I do, but I love what I do, just like my competitive mountain biking.”

- Sherrene Kevan of Bird Song Bytes says, “With every challenge in life comes the opportunity for creativity. In the last two years I've come up with more ideas that I want to pursue, and I find just the creativity part to be a lot of fun.”

- A friend once told Karem Kalin of Smiles Made Easy that she was a “doer.” “I think you have to be a doer to take an idea or invention to the next level. I'm not one to

sit still and I love a challenge. When I had the idea, I thought to myself, I don't want to wonder ‘what if?’ I didn't want to regret not trying. That alone gave me enough motivation to give it a shot. And I'm also the type that once I decide to do something, I don't stop until I feel I've given it my best shot. In other words, I didn't stop when I heard the first no, or that's not going to sell.”

Kalin didn't have any business or marketing experience before starting her venture. But in terms of skills she did have, she says “persistence, not being afraid to ask questions, patience, time-management skills (I have two young boys and another profession), creativity and determination were all necessary attributes to get me where I am today.”

Bird Song Bytes, created by Sherrene Kevan, has software that allows users to listen to a bird song and identify the bird on their computer, PDA or cellphone.



► why they are so special to us.”

Launched in July 2003, Smiles Made Easy has made it simple and stylish to do just that with a box of fill-in-the-blank note cards. Each card starts with a thought — “You’re a great...”, “Can you believe we...” or “I hope...” — and allows the writer to add his or her own finish. The results can be encouraging, inspiring, reminiscent or just plain goofy. Each tin contains 15 different note cards with envelopes. Five themes are available: I Love it When..., Remember When..., You’re a Great Mom Because..., I Have Fun When..., and I am Proud When...

Kalin had the idea for a number of years, but once she decided to just go for it, it took six months from the concept stage to having the product in hand.

She used the internet to find manufacturers of hinged tin boxes, requesting samples, and making decisions on size. She then spoke with several local graphic designers and printing companies. Many male designers had trouble grasping the concept, just not “getting it.” Then Kalin met with Linda Lamouroux from Pathways who “got it,” and they have been working together ever since.

They came up with the logo and look of the cards together. Five hundred tins were created initially, assembled by Kalin and her husband on the kitchen table, which saved a substantial amount of money. Kalin admitted she was nervous when the time came to sell the product. Working full time, and with a small child, made the task

Mother-daughter team Francine and Carinne Chambers created the DivaCup.



more daunting.

She decided to visit the Paper Tree, a favourite store in downtown Waterloo. After just five minutes, the owner bought the product and carried it until the store closed last year. I took Kalin just a couple of weeks to meet her goal of placing the product in 10 stores within six months. Sending out media releases helped get the word out about the product. When she had questions or needed resources, Kalin used the Guelph and Kitchener Small Business Centres.

Smiles Made Easy is available in stores nationwide, in the U.S. and on their website at www.smilesmadeeasy.com.

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Growing up with parents and grandparents who showed her how to fix things and to live frugally, Sherrene Kevan of Cambridge combined these skills with knowledge and creativity to take Bird Song Bytes from idea to product.

“Doing graduate studies at the University

of Waterloo really opened up my eyes to the possibilities of creating something from my ideas and running with it,” Kevan says. Bird Song Bytes combined two passions — birding and computers.

On the market since 2005, The Dawn Chorus I CD has software that allows users to listen to any bird’s tweets and identify the bird on their computer, PDA or cellphone. Users can make up their own checklists or field guides from the colour photographs and songs of 136 common Ontario birds, and download the information to a PDA that has a Palm OS system. The photos and songs were licensed from other sources.

Available online at Volumes Inc. or through their website, www.enviroquestltd.com.

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About 15 years ago Kitchener resident Francine Chambers and her daughter, Carinne, recognized the need for a convenient alternative to unreliable disposable tampons and napkins.

They located a company making a menstrual cup similar to one developed in the 1930s, and they sold this rubber/latex product worldwide for 10 years.

Then in 2003, realizing that latex is a common allergen, the women re-engineered the menstrual cup with proprietary features. They developed a modern redesign made from soft, top-quality silicone and launched their own company, Diva International. The DivaCup has attained the rigorous International Organization for Standardization certification.

It is sold in London Drugs worldwide, and on the website: www.divacup.com.

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Joanne Lee had an idea, but it didn't come to fruition until she met Donna Kotsopoulos at Wilfrid Laurier University in the summer of 2007. Shortly before Lee joined Laurier as a developmental psychologist, she had the idea of examining adult mathematics during daily interactions with children. Her research on 60 families revealed that parents




do not talk numbers with their children when they play together.

When Lee met Kotsopoulos, a mathematics professor, they recognized the need for a numeracy program in the community and developed a workshop called Little Counters Program to help parents teach their children basic numeracy concepts prior to schooling.

According to Kotsopoulos, "The basic concept of the program is about using math talk in daily interactions to teach mathematical concepts such as counting and the number of elements in a set in a fun way.

"Parents often focus exclusively on naming objects. Numbering objects gives the opportunity for parents to begin teaching their children to count."

Launched in spring 2009, the program is available locally, but they are looking for partners to be able to offer the program more broadly. The free workshop is offered at both the Kitchener and the Waterloo public libraries. They are planning to offer it for a limited time at the university in the spring.

For more on Little Counters, check the website for the Laurier Child Language and Math Lab: www.wlu.ca/childlab. 

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