

Local inventors' product goes national

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Sioux Falls Business Journal

published: 11/04/2003

Two men seek millionaire status via magnetic gloves

Payday has arrived for two Sioux Falls men who came up with idea of putting magnets on the back of work gloves and then spent years getting the product to market.

SilverBack magnetic-powered gloves are showing up on store shelves across the United States, and the new product soon will be promoted in a nationwide advertising campaign.

Magnets on the fingertipless gloves keep nails, screws and tools within easy reaching distance.

The inventors, Tom Jellema and Tom O'Dea, are confident that sales will make them wealthy. Money is starting to come in.

"I'll never have to work again," Jellema said.

"Definitely, this is going to make Tom and I millionaires. We knew that four years ago, if we could just get the right company."

O'Dea and Jellema, who retain patent rights, found the right partner in the Illinois Glove Co. of Northbrook, Ill.

Illinois Glove, which owns licensing rights to SilverBack gloves, has taken over duties ranging from manufacturing to distribution. O'Dea and Jellema get a percentage of the wholesale revenue as royalties.

The gloves retail for about \$25, and the inventors expect millions of pairs to be sold in 2004. Magnets allow glove wearers to keep metal parts and tools as big as a hammer close at hand.

Illinois Glove, a private company, will not release sales projections or other numbers pertaining to the transaction. But Jay Shmikler, director of sales and marketing for Illinois Glove, said SilverBacks will be a huge seller.

"The response has been tremendous, unbelievable," Shmikler said. "We make a full line of retail and industrial and special gloves, and this product has taken off faster than any product we've had."

In addition to being sold in stores, the gloves are being tested in major automobile plants and in other industrial settings, Shmikler said.

“A lot of people have said to me, ‘I wish I would have thought of that.’ It’s a very simple product, but sometimes the best inventions are the simple ones,” he said.

O’Dea, 51, came up with the idea about eight years ago. He toyed with the notion for a few years before coming across small magnets that were powerful enough to hold metal tools.

One night over beers in a bar, O’Dea shared the glove idea with his longtime friend, Jellema.

Jellema, who is self-employed as the owner of a business that tests underground storage tanks, liked the idea. He agreed to research the idea and help get the product to market.

The two men ripped a dollar bill in half to make their partnership official. They found a variety of other gloves being sold or proposed but nothing just like the product they envisioned.

“It was a no-brainer. But no one had ever done it before,” Jellema said.

With some initial financial help from his father, Jellema has spent much of the past four and half years trying to turn O’Dea’s glove idea into reality.

Both of the inventors have experience in construction and other work that belies their high school educations.

Jellema, 48, worked for a decade inspecting power plants on the east coast before returning to Sioux Falls. Now, he plans to give his tank-testing business to a colleague.

O’Dea, 51, worked for 17 years as a sound technician for a traveling rock ‘n’ roll band. He also worked for eight years at the Gateway Inc. plant in Sioux Falls, but his position recently was eliminated.

“A glove has always been for warmth and protection. Now it’s a tool,” O’Dea said.

O’Dea and Jellema called their prototypes Handyglove. But, for legal reasons, the name had to be changed.

Jellema worked by telephone and Internet, and mailing out promotional videos to sell the idea. They got into some spats with companies along the way, but kept working.

About two and half years ago, they connected with Shmikler and other family members in the glove company.

“I get contacted by inventors a lot. They had their ducks in a row,” Jay Shmikler said.

The inventors sent what Shmikler described as a crude prototype.

“They had a very good idea, and we know how to market products for retail. We took it from there,” Shmikler said.

“We’re responsible for making it look cool. We’re responsible for manufacturing it. We market it,” he said.

SilverBacks, which carry the name of a gorilla and assembled in China, have been available in hardware and auto-parts stores since August.

“Hopefully, a year from now, you’ll see them in all appropriate retailers,” Shmikler said.

Nyberg’s Ace outlets in Sioux Falls sell SilverBacks.

“I just think it’s a great thing having someone local broadening into the national market,” said Marin Huber, advertising and public relations director for Nyberg’s Ace stores.

“The concept is just wonderful for people who need extra hands for their work.”

Glenn Petersen, store manager at the Nyberg’s Ace store at 41st Street and Minnesota Avenue, said the gloves have been available for a few weeks.

The gloves are made well and are comfortable, and the magnetic force is powerful enough to keep any small tool handy, Petersen said.

“We’ve gotten a lot of people who have looked at them and said, ‘Why didn’t I think of that,’ and think it’s a real good idea.

“I can’t say that sales have been real brisk yet. We have sold a few. I think sales will pick up as more people see them,” he said.

“I think they are going to really go well as a Christmas gift,” he said.

The inventors, meanwhile, are turning their attention to other products.

“I’ve got more inventions I’m working on,” O’Dea said. “They’re ready to go. We just have to do the legwork. Now we know how to do it.”

Joe Theesfeld, a friend of the inventors, said O’Dea and Jellema work hard and always will always work hard.

“They go. They go. They go. They never stop,” Theesfeld said.