

The Burlington Free Press

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BIG ideas
Vermonters change the way we live

JANUARY

Kneebinding, Inc. Inventor uses brain to save knees

The knee-saving ski binding developed by Kneebinding Inc. of Stowe is about to go to market, but its inventor — Rick Howell — is no longer employed by the company. He remains a stockholder and board member. He couldn't be reached for comment.

"His involvement as inventor has been invaluable, and the binding would never have reached the current level of development without his involvement," said Steve Walkerman, chief operating officer.

Last winter, the binding, which is designed to reduce strains and ruptures to knee ligaments, won a Snowpress award as one of the innovations of the year at a U.S. snow-sport trade show. This month, the binding was picked by sponsors of a European recreation trade show as a finalist in the new winter hardware category.

Walkerman just returned from Germany, where the binding is undergoing evaluation by a testing organization that approves all consumer products sold in Germany. Certification by this testing organization is the ticket to selling the binding in Europe, Walkerman said. "The testing is going very well."

The late start getting the binding on the market this season means "sales the first year will be modest," Walkerman said, but added, "customer interest is very strong."

FEBRUARY

Leland Kinsey Epic in the Kingdom

Leland Kinsey, 58, is a poet who lives in Barton. In February, he published his sixth volume of poetry, "The Immigrant's Contract."

Through a series of linked poems, "The Immigrant's Contract" tells the life story of a Northeast Kingdom man who emigrated from Canada with his parents as a child and built a life in northern Vermont, with travels beyond. Kinsey's book-length narrative poem is a literary exploration of the immigrant's life.

Since the publication of "The Immigrant's Contract," Kinsey has made 23 appearances on behalf of his book, including readings in Boston, Manchester, N.H., and throughout Vermont. This is many more appearances than he made with his other collections, Kinsey said. There were nine newspaper articles or reviews about the book, also more than usual.

"I could get that many readings because of the nature of the book," Kinsey said. "Booksellers thought it was that much more different and out of the ordinary. And I was able to generate interest."

Kinsey teaches poetry in elementary schools through the Children's Literacy Foundation. He is working on two poetry collections. One is a standard collection, the other is a series of letter/poems that encompass his life and career.

"I don't feel a poet like me is likely to get a collected or selected works published in his lifetime," Kinsey said. "In an odd way, I guess I feel this will cover the same span."

MARCH

Andrew Meyer Saving the farm

Dairy entrepreneur Andrew Meyer of Hardwick drew our attention in March not just for his two agriculture-based companies, but for his dream of bringing an agricultural renaissance to Hardwick.

He's been busy. His whey-based wood finish, Vermont Natural Coatings PolyWhey, got a big marketing boost in November when it was selected as one of the top 10 green building products of 2008 by the editors of Environmental Building News. The product is in dozens more stores, including 45 Ace Hardware outlets.

Meyer's second company, Vermont Soy, has added fresh tofu to its line of fresh soy beverages and also



A YEAR OF BIG IDEAS

Today, the Free Press concludes a yearlong look at Vermonters tackling today's challenges with tomorrow's solutions. We met inventors and innovators of every stripe, from a Northeast Kingdom poet breaking the rules with a bold new approach to a pediatric oncologist fighting cancer with relentless resolve. Our Big Ideas series ends with a look at the state's next generation of explorers and a peek back at the people we met during the project. Here's how their ideas have evolved.



has found new outlets, including Whole Foods stores in New England.

"I'm beginning to look for money to grow both companies," Meyer said in December.

He is also a leader of a group of Hardwick-area agricultural entrepreneurs. Since March, they've renamed their nonprofit group, calling it the Center for an Agricultural Economy. They bought a 15-acre field near the center of town to start an agricultural education, demonstration and research center. Separately, work is also proceeding on plans for a new agricultural industrial park to provide incubator space for farm-based businesses.

APRIL

Giselle Sholler Diagnosis: Hope

Dr. Giselle Sholler's research on the deadly childhood cancer neuroblastoma battled Dustin Cobb's tumors, helped him out of his wheelchair and up a rock-climbing wall. In the end, though, the neuroblastoma won. Dustin died July 17 at age 10.

Sholler cried. Then she got back to her research.

"The lab definitely helps me to stay focused and motivated," said the University of Vermont College of Medicine pediatric oncologist. "We're going to find a new answer."

Dustin was among 14 patients in Phase 1 of a study Sholler led of the drug nifurtimox. Just two of the 14 patients survive, but none was expected to live and the treatment gave many of them. Dustin included, months of quality time, Sholler said. The race is on to provide more patients with more time.

Sholler is well into Phase 2 of the study, with 12 more patients and companion trials starting in St. Louis and San Diego. She begins a new study in February of another cancer-fighting drug and plans another study in which she will use lab mice to tailor treatment to each patient's cancer cells.

Sholler's willingness to try new techniques and challenge standard protocol is part of what attracts patients of young neuroblastoma patients from all over the world.

Yvonne Brown's family moved from England to Vermont for six months so son Jack could be treated here. They went home in September. Jack tested clear of the disease — for now. "I'm convinced Jack is going to

come through this, and I'm convinced it's because of Giselle's caring," his mother said.

The 7-year-old is a living reminder to Sholler that the clock is ticking. "Hopefully, there's enough time to get to the next therapy," Sholler said.

MAY

Kevin Marvin Better sounds from your bass

Consultant Kevin Marvin's occupation consumes most of his work week, but the Burlington resident still squeezes in time for his passion, musical instrument innovation.

Marvin, a bass player, came up with a change for the tall, centuries-old instrument that increases its resonance and responsiveness. His innovation was to replace the traditional wooden tailpiece that links the strings to the bottom of the bass with a fan of four cables made from fishing leaders.

Over the past six months, he has made and tested tailpieces for cellos "with good success," he reports. Marvin said he's now experimenting with tailpieces for violins.

Meanwhile, his U.S. patent is pending and he plans to pursue a patent in China.

Sales of his hand-made tailpieces for bass remain by word of mouth. "But the word is out," he said, "as I have been sending them to Australia, Great Britain, Spain, Italy and the Netherlands." The tailpiece is also used by musicians in the Baltimore and St. Louis symphonies, he said.

"My next step is to start advertising."

JUNE

Louise Stoll Buckle up: Bumpy ride, then success

The economy may be grounded, but sales continue to take off for Burlington entrepreneur and inventor Louise Stoll's child restraint system for youngsters who fly but are too small to use a regular airplane seat belt.

Sales of her patented CARES Kids Fly Safe harness — a lightweight belt that helps secure kids weighing 22 to 44 pounds — topped 30,000 in 2008.

"We essentially doubled our sales this year, even given the economic downturn," Stoll said this

month. The family-run business signed deals with a European/United Kingdom distributor as well as distributors in Australia, Singapore and Malaysia. That means the product, now available in 60 stores, could see significantly more sales next year. "There's no way of knowing what next year holds but this year was a good year for us," Stoll said.

JULY

Chris Scheindel Passion in a can

"Chris Scheindel has had big ideas about little pieces of plastic for nearly 50 years," we wrote about the Bethel inventor in July.

Scheindel, a specialist in getting viscous liquids out of cans, has invented the "EarthSafe Air Power System" to squirt products like shaving gel, toothpaste and industrial lubricants out of cans in an environmentally friendly way.

Since July, Scheindel's partner on the project, metal-packaging giant Crown Holdings Inc. of Philadelphia, has marketed the can to companies in the United States and Canada. Several companies have expressed interest in testing the package for their products. The partners hope to see the can in production in 2009.

AUGUST

Brian Boland Life on high

For almost 40 years, the inventor's eyes of Brian Boland have looked to the skies. Now they're focused on land, on something the ballooning innovator coyly calls "a kind of vehicle concept."

Boland, who runs the Post Mills Airport and has spent much of his life developing lightweight hot-air balloons, is inspired by a post-World War II bit of German engineering known as the Messerschmitt, an enclosed three-wheeled vehicle that weighed less than a quarter of a ton, held two adults and one child, sped up to 65 mph and reached as high as 100 miles to the gallon with its two-stroke engine.

"Through the years I've thought something like this should be produced," Boland, who owns a 1955 Messerschmitt, said in a mid-December phone conversation. "Why don't we have things like this on the road today?"

He wants to assemble a group of enthusiasts, "almost like a little co-op," he said, who could bring expertise in small engines, welding and molding — and perhaps a little cash — to the project. He would oversee the production of a couple dozen three-wheeled vehicles by the end of next summer.

"It may just be a pipe dream," he said.

Boland hoped to get the project going this past summer but instead rebuilt a balloon museum on his property that fell victim to a collapsed roof. He felt guilty spending his time on that during the gas-price crisis over the summer.

"I felt I was letting the world down," he said.

SEPTEMBER

John Todd Appalachia's new spring

Ecological designer, author and University of Vermont research professor Dr. John Todd continues to seek funding to implement his big idea — a proposal to gradually restore vast sections of Appalachia ravaged by coal mining.

Todd's plan won the first global Buckminster Fuller Challenge in 2008 for the best idea to help humanity and the planet. Todd plans to spend the winter in Costa Rica working on reforestation and teaching an online graduate course on the ecological foundations for carbon-neutral economies.

OCTOBER

Food Works Seeds of change

Food Works at Two Rivers is a Montpelier-based nonprofit that aims to get nutritious, local and seasonal foods to people who otherwise might not have access to Vermont's farm bounty. The organization has variety of programs — agricultural nutritional and educational — a geared toward feeding this mission.

The growing season is over at Food Works' river-bottom farm in Montpelier, but other projects have sprouted.

The floor was poured for the roof cellar at Food Works' 1836 farm house on the edge of town. This will give the nonprofit 12,500 cubic feet of storage for root vegetables.

A group of stakeholders in the region's food system — from farmer to consumers to distributors — are working together in a venture called the Central Vermont Food System Council. The effort is a partnership between the city of Montpelier and Food Works, said Martin Kemple the nonprofit's co-director.

"We're all sitting around the table to determine what kinds of policy and markets we can develop to get to make ourselves more food self-sufficient," Kemple said.

NOVEMBER

David Macaulay "The Way We Work"

David Macaulay, 62, is the illustrator and author of "The Way We Work," an exploration and examination of the human body. The book published in October, belongs to genre of books conceived and created by Macaulay that are visual or cyclopedias — a set of illustrations with accompanying text that explain a range of topics.

Macaulay worked on his most recent book for six years. He studied and read about the body and medicine for four years before making his first sketches.

"The Way We Work" was on the New York Times bestseller list for six weeks, peaking at No. 5. Foreign rights to the book have been sold in six countries, including Spain and Portugal. Macaulay has been on 20-city book tour with stops in come. Articles and reviews about the book are "too numerous to mention according to Macaulay's publicist."

Macaulay is thinking about his next project. Ideas include a book about the earth or one that looks at the history of technology, along with lines of his best known book, "If