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IN DEPTH: INVENTORS AND INVENTIONS

Close up

Patent attorney John Dolan learns the rigors of inventing for himself

Sarah Sturmon Dale
Contributing writer

John Dolan's first invention came from a casual conversation about an eroding shoreline at the lake home of a friend, Al Knudson.

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A retaining wall would fix the problem -- but interlocking block would degrade too quickly; other options, such as rip-rap, weren't aesthetically pleasing, and still others such as certain types of concrete weren't healthy for the environment. Dolan and

Knudson decided what was needed was a plastic wall that wouldn't degrade and would look good.

That was the summer of 2000.

Today, Dolan and Knudson, whose background is in electrical engineering, are within months of seeing the prototype of their plastic bricks, called Shoreliner, roll off the production line. They are also preparing to produce Shoreplanter, a block that is perforated and can maintain plant growth.

"It is not a quick process," Dolan said with a laugh. "It is much more difficult to get a product or an idea to a tangible form than I thought."

And Dolan has much previous experience in the invention arena. He works as a patent attorney at Fredrikson & Byron, Minneapolis.

But Dolan said one other thing he has learned is that applying for patent



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protection is really just the start of the process. His company, New Technology Resources Inc., already has one issued, one allowed and on its way to being granted, and two more pending.

"Thinking up things and putting it down on paper is really only about 10 percent of the process," he said. "Once you end up doing a patent application, you've barely scratched the surface. However, without the patent, you have inhibited your chances of stopping someone else from commercializing your valuable ideas."

Dolan is a late bloomer in the inventing field -- although he admits to creating a few devices when he was younger to help improve his baseball pitching and hitting. A farm boy from Milroy, a small town 12 miles east of Marshall, his first paying job was as a Little League coach for the local parks and recreation department.

That job helped instill team-building skills in him that he still uses today.

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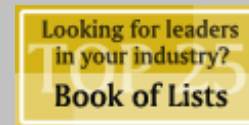
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After college and law school, he worked as a law clerk for the chief judge of Minnesota's Fifth Judicial District. He worked as a public defender, then moved to the Lyon County attorney's office. After prosecuting two first-degree murder trials, he decided it was time for a life change.

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When his wife's job brought them to the Twin Cities, he went back to school and got a bachelor's of science degree in chemistry; a technical background is a requirement to sit for the patent bar. That led him to a stint as a patent examiner with the U.S. Patent and

Trademark Office in Washington, where he examined patent applications related to organic chemistry and biotechnology. He returned to the Twin Cities in 1999 and started serving as a patent attorney in private practice.

David Masters, president of Gel Del Technologies, a Minneapolis bioscience firm, calls Dolan a "warm and comfortable person" to work with who also has an outstanding intellect.

"He understands how to take inventive ideas and patent them, which is a highly skilled art," he said. "His role as an inventor himself helps in communicating."

Dolan said he has always had an aptitude for science, but doesn't really see himself as an inventor.

However, he said, becoming one has helped him appreciate the range of emotions the inventors who hire him often are feeling. "There's the anticipation, the frustration and the anxiety," he said. "Here you are signing checks for something that isn't tangible. In reality, you are really making an investment in your company's future."



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A simple patent application for an individual inventor runs \$375 just for the filing fee. An application for an international patent runs \$2,000. And that doesn't count the fee to have someone like Dolan draft the patent application, which can run a few thousand dollars to tens of thousands of dollars.

And where does Dolan get his best ideas? "Usually I get my best ideas when I am speaking with other people about existing products," he said. "Or, I'll read something and realize, I can do better than that."

Sarah Sturmon Dale is a free-lance writer based in Chanhassen.

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