

Soda Opener Opens Doors

New Haven Girl Patents Invention, Finds Backer

By LIZ MICHALSKI
SPECIAL TO THE COURANT

The ez-pop is a 99-cent device that might eventually pay Marlinette Pacheco thousands for college.

Thirteen-year-old Marlinette, of New Haven, is the inventor of a shiny metal gadget that opens pop-top soda cans. A 4-inch-long tool with a raised bar at one end and a conventional bottle opener at the other, the ez-pop is simple to use; you just slide the bar under the tab of a can, and lift.

Designed for people with arthritic fingers, as well as those who want to save their fingernails, the ez-pop went on sale during the summer and retails for just under \$1.

Marlinette got the idea for the ez-pop as a fourth-grade contestant in the 1999 Invention Convention, a statewide science fair for students from kindergarten through high school.

"I was trying to think of stuff that was useful, and I have really short fingernails," she said.

It was difficult for her to open soda cans, and she figured she wasn't alone. Her idea impressed her



THE EZ-POP is designed for people who have arthritic fingers-or who just want to save their fingernails

father, but Victor Pacheco was concerned about the time the contest required.

"As a parent, when your child comes home with a project, sometimes you hope that it will take just one or two weeks," said Pacheco, a helicopter mechanic for the Army National Guard.

When Marlinette asked him to help her look for products similar to the one she was imagining in stores beyond their New Haven neighborhood, he realized that she would need a bigger commitment from him than just a few weekends.

"I went to tell her teacher that because of the time required, the contest just wasn't going to work. Before I could say anything, she told me how excited she was that Marlinette was still entered -- all the other students had withdrawn," Pacheco said. "So I swallowed hard and didn't say anything."

For the next few months, dad and daughter spent weekends searching malls, supermarkets and any other store they could think of for products that resembled the fruit of Marlinette's imagination, which she was tentatively calling the Beauty Nail Saver Pop Tab Opener.

They journeyed as far as New Jersey to check store shelves, and became increasingly excited when they returned empty-handed from each trip.

"There just wasn't anything like it," Victor Pacheco said.

Apparently, the judges agreed. They awarded Marlinette, who attends East Rock Global Magnet

School in New Haven, first prize in her grade division, based on the clay model she created.

“It was exciting, but I was a little nervous. I'd been in science fairs before, but these judges asked lots of questions,” she said.

As a first-place winner, Marlinette got an award and a watch, but she decided to go after a bigger prize -- a patent on her idea.

She asked her father, by then her biggest supporter, to create a prototype from some scrap metal left over from his job. On the advice of Marlinette's teacher, the two started spending hours at the New Haven Free Public Library, one of only two libraries in the state with a patent room.

Because of the cost, the Pachecos did the work of filing a patent themselves, using the library's information as their main resource. The process took about 19 months, and it cost them about \$1,000 for the patent, a copyright and a trademark, according to Victor Pacheco. Along the way, the product was renamed the ez-pop.

Metal prototype in hand, the Pachecos started looking for a manufacturer. At an invention trade show, their product caught the eye of Edward Kalat, president of Southington Tool & Manufacturing Corp.

Kalat was so impressed by the prototype -- and that the invention came from a 9-year-old -- that he agreed to serve as investor, manufacturing the ez-pop at no cost to the Pachecos. That meant an initial outlay of \$20,000, just for the machine to make the ez-pop.

“I just thought this would be a good product to bring to marketplace,” said Kalat, who calls his role as investment angel “kind of a one-time circumstance.”

The first batch of ez-pops rolled off the assembly line during the summer, and the Pachecos, including Marlinette's mother, Alicia, spent the better part of a week inserting them into packages at the kitchen table of their apartment.

“It was a lot of work,” Marlinette said.

But it has paid off. Shaw's Supermarkets placed an order for 3,000 ez-pops, and Stop & Shop of Southington ordered 1,000.

Although Marlinette has yet to see a profit, she and her dad plan to keep expanding the ez-pop market. They've written letters to more than 500 companies, ranging from cosmetic firms to airlines, extolling the virtues of the device. And they also hope to acquire international rights.

Any profits they do see are earmarked for college, Marlinette said. The National Junior Honor Society student is considering careers ranging from fashion design to pediatrics.

Between homework, friends, and marketing the ez-pop, Marlinette, now an eighth-grader, has had no time to come up with any more product ideas. And that's fine with her father.

“I keep telling her, ‘No new ideas,’ ” he said. “We're not done with this one.”

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