

Helping Hands

ARTHRITIS SUFFERER'S PRODUCT LINE DESIGNED TO HELP PEOPLE WITH HAND AND WRIST CHALLENGES **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

IN THE January 2023 *Inventors Digest*, I wrote about EazyHold—a line of assistive devices to help seniors, people with disabilities, and more. Here is a new product line created by UK-born Sarah Dillingham, who lives in the state of Washington, to assist people with hand and wrist challenges. It's called Grace & Able.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Please tell us a bit about yourself and your background.

Sarah Dillingham (SD): I have rheumatoid arthritis and was diagnosed at age 28. I'm originally from London, where I worked on projects for large corporate companies. I married an American, and we moved to Washington about five years ago.

EGT: Please fully describe your product line.

SD: Grace & Able empowers women with arthritis by offering better joint support. Our products are hand therapist designed to meet the needs of the 50 million American women living with chronic joint pain.

Grace & Able's joint support reduces pain and swelling through gentle compression and lightweight splinting. Our products are designed for

all-day comfort, with features like easy on/off zippers, soft breathable fabrics, and a streamlined shape. Color and sizing are important to our customers, which is why we go up to five sizes and eight colors.

We currently have two therapeutic products on the market: wrist braces for support and stability, and compression gloves for relief from arthritis.

EGT: How long have you been working on the inventing process and product development?

SD: Ten years! It started when I had to wear an orthopedic brace to do my first dance at my wedding due to arthritis damage in my wrist.

The brace was ugly and bulky, so I redesigned it to match my dress.

I shared the images online and discovered many other women looking for more attractive and comfortable joint support alternatives.

I knew there was a business here because of the high level of customer dissatisfaction with competitor products, but didn't know how to make it happen. Manufacturing a physical medical device seemed very daunting.

I was interested in the potential of 3D printing for orthopedic splinting. I developed an ergonomic, lightweight wrist splint with the help of Innovate UK, a government agency that supports British inventors.

Then, life intervened. I was in an accident. I sustained a serious head injury and had to put the project on hold. But even during my recovery, I couldn't stop thinking about the idea.

"I knew there was a business here because of the high level of customer dissatisfaction with competitor products." —SARAH DILLINGHAM

Sarah Dillingham, who has rheumatoid arthritis, founded Grace & Able. The product line includes the Breathe wrist brace.



When I moved to the USA, I advertised for hand therapists to help with the medical side of product development and met Trevor Petrie, a certified hand therapist. We immediately clicked, with aligned visions for joint support products that meet biomechanical, neuromuscular and psychosocial patient needs—in short, braces that are medically effective, comfortable and attractive.

We incorporated Grace & Able in 2021 to bring our new and improved compression gloves and wrist braces to market in 2022.

We are a bootstrapped company, completely self-funded except for a small grant from helloalice.com.

EGT: Where are you selling? (I did see other possible knockoffs of your products on Amazon. How do you handle this?)

SD: We primarily sell via our website. We are also on Etsy and Walmart.com, and have some new sales channels opening shortly.

Our IP protections include our trademark and three patents (one utility, two design). It is unlikely that these protections will stop knockoffs.

Our strategy is to keep building our reputation as a trusted brand. We do that by connecting closely with our customers so that we can keep delivering great products for them and provide them with a high level of customer service.

EGT: Have you invented anything else? Have you had any obstacles?

SD: Yes and no. I have had many invention ideas, but the wrist brace is the first one I've patented and brought to market.

In fact, I have too many invention ideas, which can be quite distracting. I keep a spreadsheet of all the inventions that I'd like to develop so they don't keep buzzing around my brain. The ideas range from fishkeeping equipment to a device to help people with ADHD focus during meetings.

The biggest obstacle with Grace & Able was my lack of knowledge and experience around manufacturing and running an e-commerce business. It's a steep learning curve. I have invested time in improving my knowledge and

skills through programs like the Washington Innovation Network, M2D2 IMPACT Cycle 5, the Fellowship of Female Founders, and Venture Labs. There are so many incredible programs that can help aspiring entrepreneurs fill in the gaps in their skills through formal learning and mentorship.

Also, a big shout-out to The Women Inventors Club—product-based entrepreneurs, run by Marcy McKenna, which is full of female inventors supporting one another.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing?

SD: For our wrist braces, the splints are manufactured in the USA, and the soft goods element is made in Guatemala. We are very impressed with the Guatemala factory in terms of quality, communication and how they treat their staff.

Our compression gloves are manufactured in China. We have a great relationship with our factory, which is third-party inspected. We talked with around 10 factories in the USA and overseas until we settled on this one.

EGT: Are you working with an independent testing laboratory for quality control testing?

SD: Our products are third-party lab tested to meet regulatory requirements for Azo dyes, colorfastness and laundering. We are FDA registered for Class 1 medical devices, so we meet their requirements, too, including complaint handling.

EGT: Does this type of product require product liability insurance?

SD: Yes, we have product liability insurance.

EGT: Have you received any patents? Has that process been difficult?

SD: We have one utility patent and two design patents on our wrist braces. We hired a patent



Color and sizing are important to customers, as with Grace & Able's compression gloves.

attorney because the patent filing process is so technical.

My big tip is to hire an experienced patent artist to do the drawings. If there are any inconsistencies, the USPTO will send them back.

EGT: What advice do you have for those who might be interested in developing similar assistive devices, or suggestions on the invention process in general?

SD: 1) Validation is everything. Do not throw yourself into developing a product until you have validated the customer demand, market size, competitor, and patent landscape. Your time and money are very precious. It's painful to let go of an idea you love, but it's much worse to spend a year and your savings on an idea that is doomed to fail.

2) You don't need to do it alone; join an inventor group or program. There are tons of wonderful people in the inventor and

entrepreneurial community who have been there and done it, with insightful lessons to share and who love to support up-and-coming inventors.

3) If your invention is a medical device, Boston and Seattle both have strong ecosystems around health.


EGT: Are you developing any new products?

SD: We have two exciting new products coming out soon. I can't tell you more than that, even though I'd love to shout about them. 🤖

Details: graceandable.com

Edith G. Tolchin has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000 (edietolchin.com/portfolio). She is the author of several books, including "Secrets of Successful Women Inventors" (<https://a.co/d/fAGlvZJ>) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing" (<https://a.co/d/8dafJd6>).





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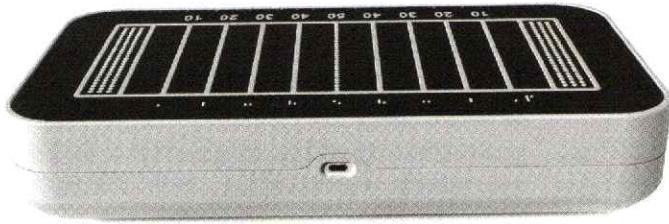


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12 Marlon, you're really getting some tough sounds from the conga there, boy."

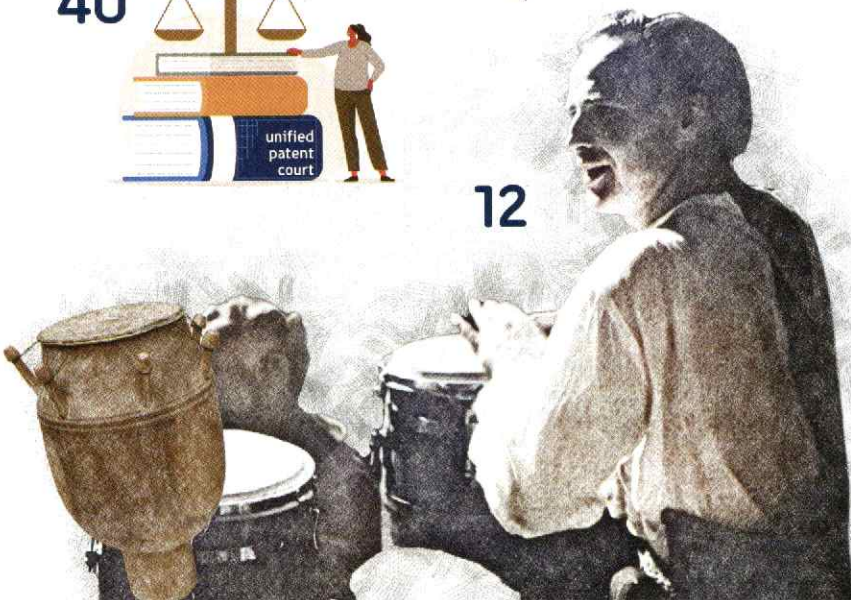
35 First, they ignore you, then they say you're mad, then dangerous, then there's a pause, and then you can't find anyone who disagrees with you.

40 Once again, we are left trying to fix a mess the courts created where none existed before.

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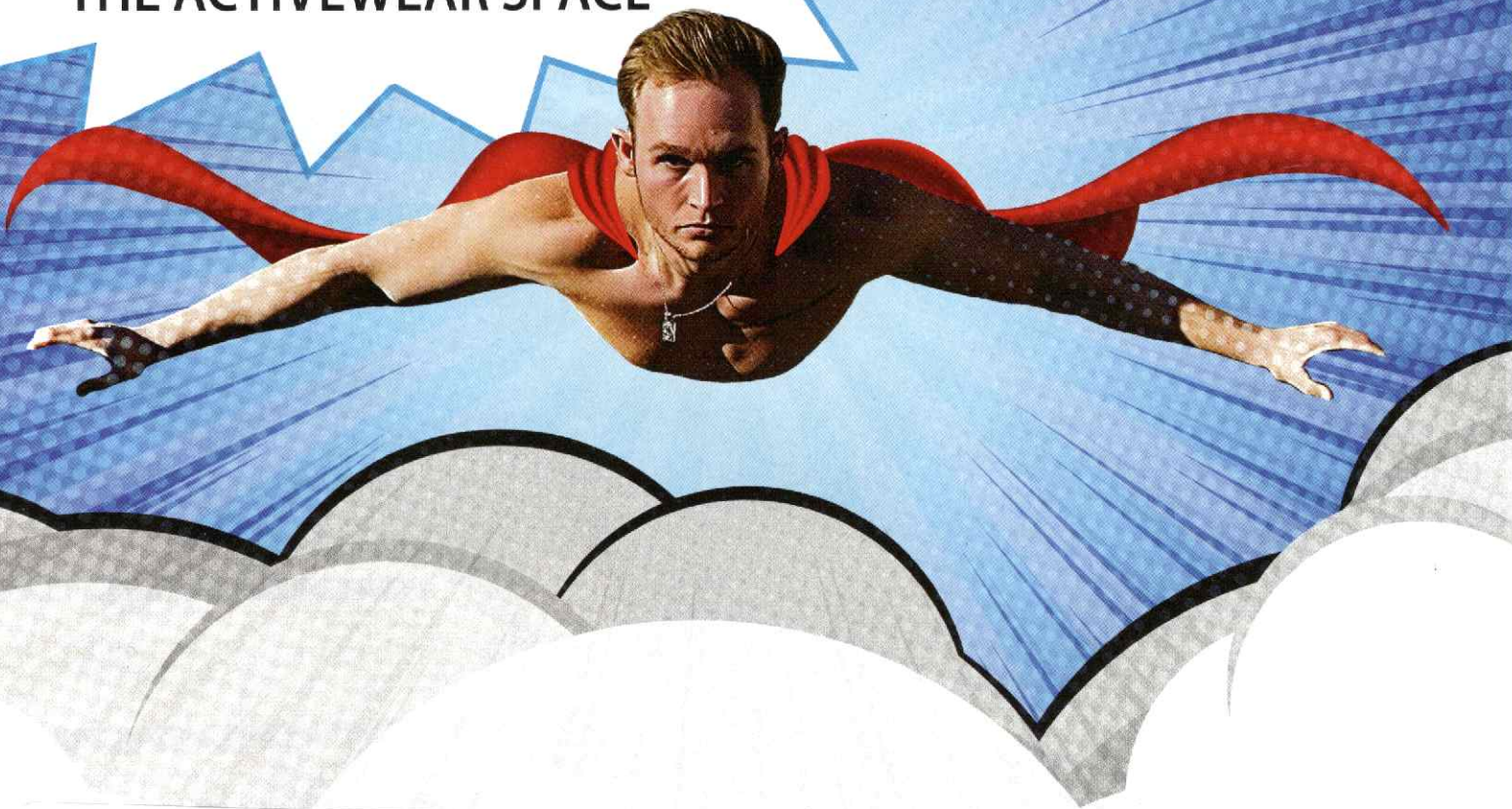
Focus on the Fun and Fascinating

Inventors

DIGEST

SELF-MADE MARVEL

AUSTIN GAYNE SOARS IN THE ACTIVEWEAR SPACE



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