

# Off-the-Cuff Discovery

UNIVERSAL GRIP ASSIST HELPS PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES AND STRENGTH ISSUES BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN

**H**ERE IS a line of creative, innovative, assistive devices invented by three sisters from California while one of the sisters was rehabbing from a thumb injury. These products help young children and seniors, as well as people with disabilities. We spoke with Kerry Mellin, though the co-inventors are sisters Wendy and Merrily Mellin.

**Edith G. Tolchin (EGT):** How did you come up with the idea of the EaZyHold, and how does it work?

**Kerry Mellin (KM):** In 2014, preparing for a get-together, I went to sweep the horse barn. But due to a thumb injury, I couldn't grip the broom's handle without intense pain.

Frustrated, I grabbed duct tape, made a loop, and slipped my hand in. I was surprised how effortless it felt having this little bit of support over the back of my hand, enabling me to maintain control with little "grip."

Later at the party, I told my sisters about having to tape my hand to a broom. We laughed but agreed this wasn't an isolated problem; many other people had grip issues. We decided then to

innovate a new product to get a better grip on the tools people need to use every day.

We got to work the next day, prototyping. I'd hospital-volunteered in the past so I had some knowledge of universal cuffs. They were made of hard plastic, leather, elastic, scratchy Velcro, and were not at all adaptable or subitizable, and had not improved for 40 years.

Ours would be soft, comfortable, hygienic and super adaptable. Our kitchens became workshops: We sculpted clay models, made molds, mixed, colored, poured, and cured silicone to prototype 20 sizes and 1000 samples for trial.

Of note:

It's the first cuff that puts the tool in the hand directly against the skin, which allows for greater sensory perception and control to feel the texture, shape and size of the object—the cold of a fork, the warmth of a wooden spoon, the vibrating beat of a drumstick, or the brush. It adapts to something as small as a pencil or fork, to as large as a boat oar or walker.

It's the only cuff made in sizes for children's hands and limbs.

It's used with conditions such as TBI, stroke, arthritis, ALS, Parkinson's, cerebral palsy, spinal cord injuries, neurological disorders, poor gross and fine motor skills, and rehabilitation.

**EGT:** Please share your background. Have you ever invented anything else?

**KM:** As a girl, I was always creating homemade gifts, horse saddlebags, making school clothes, jewelry, and embroidery. In my 35-year career as a Union TV costumer, my job was to create interesting characters by designing and building puppets, walkabouts like hamburger, pizza and spaghetti people, flying angels and demons, futuristic spacemen. So I became very familiar with polymers and textiles.

Inventor Kerry Mellin says EaZyHold is the only cuff made in sizes for children's hands and limbs.



**EGT:** How long did it take you from concept to market?

**KM:** Two years: We invented it in 2014 and began selling on eazyhold.com in 2016.

**EGT:** Where are you selling the EaZyHold?

**KM:** A best-seller on Amazon, they've supported our product from the beginning—including "Amazon's Top Six Women-Owned Small Businesses of 2019" for "Commitment to the community, innovation, customer satisfaction."

Just back from Seattle's Amazon-Accelerate-Conference, we were honored and highlighted in their opening keynote address with a video shown to 3,000 attendees and thousands of virtual attendees.

They recently sent a film crew to my ranch here in Simi Valley to shoot a playdate we had with five kids with physical challenges who have grown up using EaZyHold. We painted horseshoes, planted flowers in the garden, rode horses, fed the chickens, and played musical instruments using EaZyHold.

We have 25 global distributors and are used in over 15,000 care facilities and schools.

**EGT:** Where are you manufacturing? Have you had any difficulties with quality control or logistics?

**KM:** Our manufacturers are in Lake Forest, California: Hercules OEM. Any time we've had concerns regarding softness, color, or mold, they immediately address it.

We've been fortunate to partner with them since Day 1 and have had little to no issues—which is very rare for a new company. But we worked hard to find them, so they're the right fit for us.

**EGT:** Is EaZyHold patented? Was obtaining the patents difficult?

**KM:** Yes, we have a utility and a design patent. But Lord knows it took us a minute to find a good patent attorney!

We interviewed five highly recommended patent attorneys, yet each one told us the product was, "too simple; not sure of its relevance;



**"We interviewed five highly recommended patent attorneys. ... They couldn't see it awarded a patent. They happened to be all males. So, we specifically sought out a female. What a game changer!"**—KERRY MELLIN

who would benefit from it?" They couldn't see it awarded a patent.

They happened to be all males. So, we specifically sought out a female (only 20 percent of patent attorneys are females). What a game changer!

The moment we showed her the prototype, she was on board.

She was able to picture it in the market and envision how it would enhance so many lives. She spoke of her elderly parents and special-needs daughter. A female and natural caregiver, she was sensitive to the need for more inclusive adaptive technology in the marketplace.

Eighteen months later, we had our first patent—and soon after, our second.

**Above:** An accidental discovery in 2014 while sweeping a horse barn led sisters Wendy, Kerry and Merrily Mellin (left to right) to help people get a grip.

**EGT:** Have you had any challenges with any phase of product development?

**KM:** Many! As three females, and with no medical backgrounds or degrees in “Class 1 medical devices”—I’m a TV a costume designer, Wendy a culinary chef, and Merrily a director of early education—we knew this was going to be a challenge.

Sending our CAD files for molding product quotes, email after email, we received zero responses. Four months later, we re-sent with a male name. The quotes started streaming in for “Jeff.” Saying we were frustrated was an understatement.

When reaching out to therapists, we tried to make appointments with physical therapists and doctors via phone and email to try our EaZyHolds, but there was no protocol to fit us in with an appointment. And when we tried to visit in person, we were shooed away from the front desks.

EaZyHold’s tools for adults can help people suffering from myriad medical conditions and injuries.



Undaunted, we started hiding in the hospital hallways near their offices, and when they exited their doors to head for lunch, we ambushed them with our products in hand: an EaZyHold on a fork, on a toothbrush, on a sippy cup. Each and every one of them was fascinated by the innovation, had seen nothing like them, and told us that they had patients they would like to try them with. We happily left samples.

# The Opinionated Editor

## Edith G. Tolchin

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**EGT: Who handles your quality control? And your PR?**

**KM:** Family-owned and operated, my sister Merrily and I both handle quality control and also take care of all of the distribution and business financials. I handle the PR, sales, expos, and partnerships and new designs. My sister Wendy does the packaging and fulfillment, and my daughter-in-law Polina is our director of marketing.

**EGT: Is any government safety testing required for EaZyHold?**

**KM:** No specific safety testing is necessary for EaZyhold. However, we maintain a high standard—using 100 percent FDA-approved, food-grade silicone—to assure that it is completely hygienic and non-toxic.

**EGT: Do you have any advice for people who want to invent and bring a product to market?**

**KM:** Invention is a melding of old and new ideas. For me, I innovated EaZyHold because of wanting to continue to work on my ranch with my horses. If it's a love of yours for any length of time, there's a good chance you've found ways to make it more affordable, accessible, or a better way of performing it so that others could benefit from "Necessity is the mother of invention"—and that worked for me.

Making a product that first helped me continue to enjoy my passion and ended up having the side benefit of helping so many other people live fuller lives as well, is ... just about the best feeling there is! 🍷

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**Edith G Tolchin** has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000. She is an editor ([opinionatededitor.com/testimonials](http://opinionatededitor.com/testimonials)), writer ([edietolchin.com](http://edietolchin.com)), and has specialized in China manufacturing since 1990 ([egtglobaltrading.com](http://egtglobaltrading.com)).



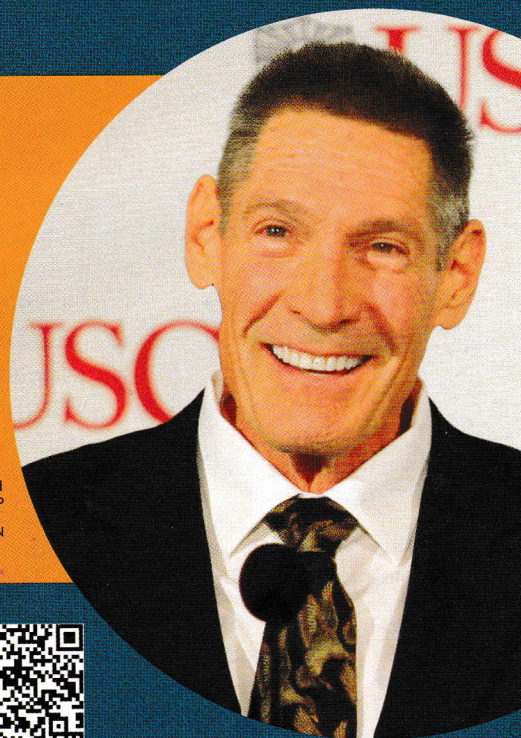
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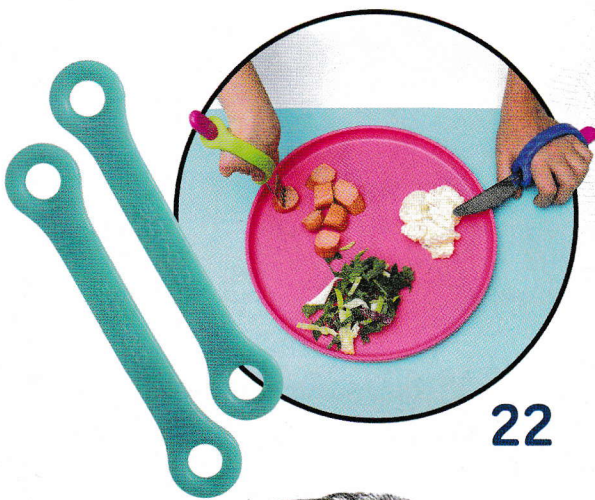


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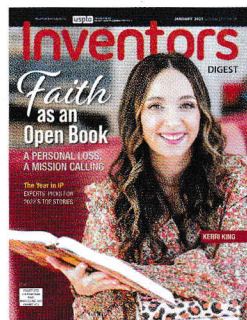
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