

Switching Gears

MAN'S INVENTION EVOLVES FROM TOY CAR TO A FUN AID FOR SPECIAL-NEEDS KIDS **BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN**

I ENJOY LEARNING about new inventions when the inventors' PR firms contact me to assess my interest. I prefer covering baby and children's products because I understand them, having manufactured them for about 23 years.

Here's a kiddie invention that, while it's not typically in the categories I work with (textile and sewn kids' inventions), it has a twist to it. It started out geared toward one market and ended up with a big following in another. Mike Jones is the inventor of the Pumper Car.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Mike, please tell us about yourself, your background and how your invention came about.

Mike Jones: (MJ): I grew up in Utah and moved to Oregon after college. I started a concrete business, and while I was working I would always have these ideas. I think it was from growing up on the farm and fixing farm equipment.

When my son was about 7, my wife, Sig, and I bought him a scooter. I looked at the price and it was very expensive. I thought, "That's a really lame toy that you just stand on and push it down the road."

I thought that if you could stand on it and pump the handlebars back and forth and maybe have three gears on it, that'd be a fun toy. I just stood there and envisioned how I would do it. I went home and built one, and that started the whole process. It went from two wheels to three wheels to the four wheels we have now.

EGT: Please describe the Pumper Car in detail, and how it evolved to a toy car used for many different therapies to help differently abled children.

MJ: The Pumper Car is a four-wheeled unit that you sit in like any little pedal car—but when you sit in the seat of this, you put your feet on the pedals on the bottom and your hands on the handlebars. Then you pull the handlebars back and push your feet.

It's all in one motion. It's like a rowing machine. We put it out in the toy market, but it was too expensive as a toy. It didn't take off very well as a toy.

We were just thinking of closing down the toy and shelving the mold when we did a survey of our warranty cards. Seventy percent of the warranty cards at the time were children's hospitals, schools and physical therapy clinics that had purchased the product.

We delved into that and found that most of the major hospitals were using our product in therapy and had some pretty incredible stories on how to help children. We wanted Medicare and Medicaid coverage so these children with special needs could acquire one. Normally, a family with special needs is financially strapped.

During that process we knew that we needed an Institutional Review Board study. The University of Hawaii started one on autism but ran out of funding. We couldn't send them money, or it would have looked like we were buying an IRB study.

The University of Michigan had used them in day care centers in Michigan, and it wanted to do an IRB study. The University of Hawaii determined that the

Mike Jones (shown with his wife, Sig, and grandchildren Hallie and Abbie) came up with the idea for the Pumper Car after he and Sig were disappointed by the "lame" usefulness of typical scooters.



"We found that most of the major hospitals were using our product in therapy and had some pretty incredible stories on how to help children." —MIKE JONES



The Pumper Car's rowing machine motion has proven physical and psychological benefits for special-needs children—and now seniors are interested, too.

product met approximately 29 special needs from the letters we sent, and its focus was on children with autism. The University of Michigan focused on children with Down syndrome, and its finding was that this motivates children approximately 200 percent over anything it used to give a full-body increase in intensity and duration of exercise.

EGT: Is this something adults could use for enjoyment? As senior, I've seen low adult tricycles in adult communities.

MJ: Yes, we have since almost Day 1. Every adult in the senior center said "I would like one of these for me," so we started down the path and we've made probably 13 different prototypes of an adult model. We settled on two that we would like to bring to market in the near future.

EGT: How many prototypes did you make before you decided on the final one?

MJ: That's a very good question. Anyone who's done inventing of any type realizes that many, many prototypes are made. I would say a minimum of 15 different prototypes, and we're still making prototypes of different versions. I haven't stopped making prototypes since I thought of this idea.

EGT: Where are you manufacturing? Have you had any problems with the required production safety testing in accordance with the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008? What certifications did you need for the Pumper Car?

MJ: We started manufacturing this in St. Louis, but since it was a petroleum-based product and gasoline costs went way up, we moved the manufacturing to China.

We have passed all current safety standards. We always like to have a product meet or exceed testing standards for products. For our last testing, we had to test the whole scope of what products need for pediatrics and children. We met or exceeded all.

EGT: I watched the video on your website and thought perhaps you might add a seat belt for added safety because some children may need this. Your thoughts?

MJ: We feel it is not necessary currently. The only thing we have designed was a seat belt for truncal support for kids with special needs. We have had over 20,000 units in the marketplace with no reported injuries. I think that's a safety testing itself.

EGT: Have you done any crowdfunding? Are you seeking a licensing agreement, or do you wish to continue the business on your own?

MJ: We have over the years. Anyone who has gone through product development of this extent realizes it takes quite a bit of cash to put these models out. We have about \$2 million per product in investment, just getting them to market.



Phoenix started using the Pumper Car to help her with mobility challenges, but her parents had no idea it would light up her face the way it has.

Are we thinking license agreement? We're probably going to try and seek a hybrid of that. Until then, we are conducting the business on our own.

EGT: Please share your patent process. Any complications?

MJ: Anybody who is building something like this and patenting something realizes there are complications, and the first one was the hardest because I had no idea what

I was doing. It was very, very expensive and just like anything in life, you learn as you go. You try not make the same mistake twice.

Regarding complications, we submitted 21 claims for a utility patent on the Pumper Car. The patent office responded back there was absolutely no way they were going to accept any of them. We strongly encourage inventors to get a patent attorney, as they helped us get 19 of the original utility claims accepted.

EGT: How is the product sold? Retail, website or Amazon? Pricing, different models?

MJ: We have two different models now, and we are about to introduce a third model—The Original Pumper Car (ages 4-12).

Pricing is around \$400. We invented the Junior model (ages 2-5) because we were asked repeatedly by consumers for a smaller model so that children with disabilities or special needs could get involved earlier. It retails for \$349. ☺

Details: pumpercar.com

Books by **Edie Tolchin** (egt@edietolchin.com) include "Fanny on Fire" (fannyonfire.com) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing." She has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000. Edie has owned EGT Global Trading since 1997, assisting inventors with product safety issues and China manufacturing.



2 Critical Steps to getting your NEW PRODUCT "out there"

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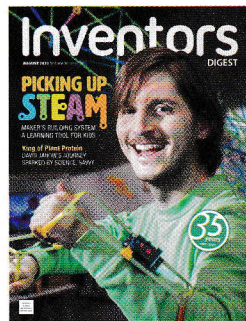
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Erik Thorstenson,
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