

Raising the Stakes inTents Magazine, June/July 2003 issue

Freedom by design *by Christine Malmgren*



Photo: A recent design show at University of Minnesota's Goldstein Gallery in St. Paul included this first prototype for a camping tent by BlueSky Designs Inc.

Universal Shelter/Vestibule Configurations



Image caption: To receive research and development funding, the company had to demonstrate the structure's broad appeal.

Design is not for philosophy-it's for life. Blue Sky Designs Inc., St. Paul, Minn., has created a universal tent that addresses the needs of even disabled campers.

Dianne Goodwin, president and director of research and development for BlueSky Designs Inc., St. Paul, Minn., having worked with the disabled, saw a lack in the camping tent market and decided to fill it. Working with CAD programs, Goodwin began to virtually adapt the traditional camping tent to the needs of the disabled. In the process, her company designed a tent that would be easier to set up and simpler to use for all campers—a great equalizer with mass appeal.

The trickiest part of the design required Goodwin to ponder how a disabled person, often with a weak upper body, could set up a tent from a sitting position. She also considered how the disabled individual could open the tent door by means other than the use of a zipper.

For the non-disabled user, the tent offers storage space for bikes, strollers and camping gear. Affectionately called the "Mod Pod," the basic structural unit can serve as a screen house, storage area, tent private commode, or shower area. It can also be used in concert with other connected tents or even a vehicle. "It's a multi-functional space," says Goodwin. "It will have a system of various zip-in walls and/ or fly attachments consumers can choose from to set up a configuration that works for them." The company is in the process of filing a provisional patent for the design.

In 1997, Goodwin formed BlueSky Designs Inc. with the goal of producing revenue by licensing all of her projects. Getting the tent funded has been an arduous process. Goodwin tried to apply for several grants but was turned down. But after being referred to the Minnesota Project Innovation Inc. (MPI), a nonprofit organization that assists science and technology entrepreneurs with getting federal grants, she received the funding she needed. MPI carefully reviewed her proposal and helped shape it. After demonstrating the appeal of her structure to all campers-not just the disabled-she received \$70,000 in grant money from Small Business Research and Innovation (SBIR). To finish her tent, Goodwin was given a two-year grant of \$296,000.

So far the company has two different door prototypes under consideration for the final version-including swinging saloon style doors. They are also looking for ways to further secure the structure against weather and bugs. Field testing will begin this summer, after which time the company will begin to actively seek a manufacturing partner. "The advantage of a manufacturer getting involved now is that we have funding for product development through the SBIR grant, so we could 'expand' their R&D resources, and we could begin to incorporate their hardware earlier in the design process, cutting the time to market," says Goodwin. The tents should be available by 2004.

For more information, contact BlueSky Designs Inc., St. Paul, Minn., 651/603-0828, www.blueskydesigns.us, e-mail dianne@blueskydesigns.us.

Christine Malmgren is Information Service Specialist and Manager of the International Achievement Awards at Industrial Fabrics Association International.