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Redwood Falls

The Invention Convention

The world's oldest annual invention convention aims to assist inventors in the competitive world of innovation.

BY ERIC LARSON

Whether they know it or not, most people have been affected by the work of Cyril and Louis Keller, Arthur L. Fry, and Harry Wegner. Without the Kellers, people might be stuck shoveling instead of riding around in Bobcat tractors. Without Fry, there would be no Post-It note to scribble down grocery lists. And without Wegner, choirs would have no risers to stand on and music educators might have to hold music for their students instead of pointing to it on the stand Wegner designed.

These men are inventors. And, just as these oft-ignored idea-men develop the products that make our lives easier, the Minnesota Inventors Congress (MIC) is a long-standing event created to make their lives easier and more successful. Held this year the weekend of June 11-13 at the Dacotah Exhibition Center at the Jackpot Junction Casino in Morton, Minn., the MIC celebrated its 47th consecutive year in the Redwood Falls area.

The small town of about 5,000 has hosted thousands of inventors, who travel from around the country to showcase a wide variety of inventions to the public. The event also gives them the opportunity to network with fellow tinkerers, take crash courses in the less creative but no less critical facets of inventing, and consult with professionals who can assist them in further developing and marketing their work.

The Big Idea

The Redwood County Inventors Congress was born in the late 1950s when local farmers and businesspeople got together to brainstorm ways to keep young people from moving to larger communities with more promising economic prospects after they finished high school.

"They figured that if they created opportunities for new product lines, they could create jobs," said Deb Hess, a Minnesota Inventors Congress board member since 1985. The first meeting-of-the-minds was held in 1957. Soon after, it was expanded to include innovators from around the state and renamed the Minnesota Inventors Congress. Perhaps another name change is in order, as inventors from 13 states attended this year's event. As the oldest annual invention convention in the world, the MIC has a reputation for having a very high level of integrity in the inventing world, said Hess. With more than two decades of experience, she has adopted a motto similar to the MIC's founders. "New ideas and new products create new markets," Hess said. "And new markets create or retain jobs."

Because of the convention's rural roots, people often assume that the MIC focuses primarily on agricultural innovations. Not true, said Hess. "We've always had diversity. The inventions have had to do with construction, home improvement, the medical field, sports, transportation, industry ..." The list goes on. A quick sampling from this year's award-winning inventions proves her point. The Reminder Reloader, a device invented by New Ulm, Minn., resident Michael Gag, makes it easy to organize pills. Jerry Ford, from St. Charles, Minn., created an automatic brake



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BOTTOM LINE:

Maintaining a core group of devoted volunteers who are willing to reach out to inexperienced attendees is an essential element to hosting a successful meeting like the Minnesota Inventors Congress. Their long-standing commitment to offering inventors access to the resources they need has ensured a successful event year in and year out. And never underestimate the need for a climate-controlled venue for a summer event. Keeping cool plays no small part in keeping attendees happy, and happy to return.

system for any wheelchair, old or new. Randy Mayse of Springfield, Ill., came up with a display for the United States Mint's "50 State Quarters" program. And Owatonna, Minn., inventor, Doug Higbee, devised a set of golf clubs that make it easy for people with limited mobility to manage the ball anywhere on the green.

Logistical Concerns

For the Minnesota Inventors Congress, a 501c3 nonprofit organization overseen by a 15-person board of directors, hosting a highly respected world-class event for inventors presents an interesting set of challenges. Whereas tradeshow and meetings are part of many organizations' yearly schedules, inventors are typically solo operators who do not necessarily know what to expect from an event. Inventors rely heavily on the MIC's small staff and a core group of about 50 to 60 volunteers.

"Inventors, as a group aren't always the most organized people," said Hess. "So [the volunteers] are in almost daily contact with them, talking them through all the details of how to rent a booth for three days," Hess said. "[The volunteers] try to educate them about how to represent themselves over the weekend and walk them through the opportunities available at the Congress to test market their product, to meet fellow inventors, and to attend the seminars." Some of the volunteers work in related industries, such as business development, said Hess, while others are merely community members committed to the MIC's mission of providing inventors with the tools to create and develop the best possible product.

MIC staff and volunteers begin meeting regularly just after New Year's to begin planning for the year's program. In March, the MIC holds a kickoff event for its staff and volunteers. They begin sending informational brochures to the names kept in their database, which includes anyone who has contacted them within the previous two years. This list includes manufacturers and industry professionals as well as inventors. A special publicity committee is also assembled to oversee ongoing communication with the public.

A long list of businesses and organizations also support the MIC as sponsors. Depending on their monetary contribution—from \$250 up to \$5,000—these sponsors are offered a range of promotional perks throughout the weekend. These perks are numerous: acknowledgement as a sponsor in MIC radio spots, weekend passes to the event, display privileges, a mention in the "Expo Guide," a sponsor plaque, listings and logos on the MIC Web site, and an exhibitor's booth throughout the weekend.

Inventors register for the Congress through the MIC Web site. The cost for individual inventors to exhibit is \$300; or \$250 for those who register early. For their dollar, inventors are provided with an 8-by-8 exhibition booth in which to present their invention.

This year, the Minnesota Patent Law Association, which has been a referral source for the MIC since its earliest days, organized brief seminars both Friday and Saturday. For a \$20 fee, members of the public could also attend the informational seminars, whose subjects included: "Inventing 101," "Patents—What Inventors Need to Know" and "Marketing on a Shoestring."

The secret to success at the MIC is putting inventors in direct contact with the industry professionals who can assist them in the product development process. To this end, the MIC organizes a casual "Expo Reception," on Friday evening, after the first full day of exhibiting. "We invite both inventors and consultants to attend. It gives everyone a chance to relax and connect with each other informally," said Randy Picka, this year's MIC president.

The Saturday evening award dinner is the culminating event of the weekend. A panel of judges with expertise in a wide variety of fields consults with each other to decide how to dole out the bronze, silver, and gold medallions, along with honorable mentions to inventors in several categories. The gold medallion winners are then eligible for the grand prize—the Robert F. Starr Award (named after one of the MIC's founders)—which is awarded on Sunday afternoon. Awards are also given in categories such as "oldest inventor," "youngest inventor" and to the inventor who traveled farthest. "Although some of the awards have nothing to do with the inventions," said Picka, "it's a good way for the inventors to find out more about each

other.”

This year’s recipient of the Robert F. Star Award was Pepper Aasgaard, an Omaha, Neb., resident. He won for his multiuse Emergency Light Blanket, which can be draped over the back of stalled cars to direct oncoming traffic a safe distance away.

In addition to the main program, the MIC remains true to its original intent of inspiring young people by hosting the Minnesota Student Inventor’s Congress (MSIC). The MSIC is a non-competitive exhibition, which has hosted some 9,000 young inventors since its inclusion in 1986. This year, the student event highlighted the creativity and innovation of more than 80 select students throughout the weekend. “The MIC is a wonderful experience for the students every year,” said Kate Martens, who is in charge of communicating with the schools and the regional competitions, which take place during the school year. “They have the chance to describe their inventions to people who are there to consult with adult inventors, and they get lots of information.”

The Places, The People

After many years at the Redwood Country Fairgrounds, the MIC moved into Redwood Falls high school’s gymnasium and then to the local Redwood Community Center. This year, the convention found a home at Jackpot Junction Casino, located about six miles east of Redwood Falls. The casino’s air-conditioned, Dacotah Exhibition Center, with more than enough space to accommodate the 90 or so exhibitors, fit the bill.

Organizers at both the casino and the convention worked very hard to meet the MIC’s family-oriented goals to make this year’s event a success, said Hess.

Aasgaard, who has attended the MIC several times, said the MIC proves to be a tremendous resource for inventors just starting out. “It really helped me become attuned to resources available to inventors,” he said. “It’s like a community of right-brained individuals.”

Although the MIC’s attendance tends to ebb and flow with the overall economy, and heavy rains in June may have influenced this year’s attendance, Hess estimated that somewhere between 5,000 and 6,000 got a peak at this year’s inventions. She said it’s often difficult to gauge success with inventors, but she heard a lot of good things about the convention. “When you have [inventors] come up and tell you personally how worthwhile the weekend was, you know you’ve done well.”

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