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# Students have designs on consumer products

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CHICAGO — Does the world really need a better mousetrap? Maybe not. But how about a better toothbrush holder for travelers? An inflatable spare oven? Or an odorless indoor composting system?

Those are just some of the winning concepts to come out of this year's National Student Design Competition. The six top-placed winners earned \$1,000 to \$2,500 in cash and a trip to the recent International Housewares Show in Chicago.

Two students from the University of Kansas, Karen Clawson of Leawood, Kan., and Benjamin Cooper Priess of St. Charles, Mo., were among 11 to receive honorable mention and \$200.

Who are these twentysomething whiz kids out to alter the consumer landscape? As children, they fit all the stereotypes of future inventors — playing Lego for hours, tying strings on doorknobs and taking clocks apart.

Now, all grown up, they're enrolled in universities and design institutes across the country, dreaming up products that will one day land on Wal-Mart shelves and in your home.

For Clawson and Priess, fourth-year students in KU's five-year industrial design program, entering the contest was an assignment for a class taught by associate professor Ron Kemnitzer.

Clawson wanted to focus on "the laundry world and the travel world because there is so much missing in both." She interviewed frequent travelers and learned people don't like to use hotel sinks to wash out clothes because of toothpaste residue.

The Packlite Wash Bag she designed basically is a portable washing machine the size of a small duffel bag. Clothes, water and detergent are placed inside, and the user can either shake the bag or lay it on its side and knead it. Embossed bumps on the inside aid agitation.

Priess' problem focused on the kitchen: how to cook two foods at once — say cherry pie and fish — without having their aromas mingle. His solution: the Spare Fire, a



DAVID PULLIAM/KANSAS CITY STAR

**Karen Clawson and Benjamin Cooper Priess, University of Kansas industrial design students, won honorable mentions for their product concepts in the National Student Design Competition. Here they are with Clawson's Packlite Wash Bag and Priess' Spare Fire portable oven.**

baglike oven with a collapsible cage that forms a cavity for cooking but flattens for storage.

Kemnitzer said what made Priess' and Clawson's products really stand out was that the students were able to "identify a situation out there in life that could be made more productive, better, happier — something that could be remedied with product design."

Kemnitzer's protégés have racked up 14 awards in the contest sponsored by the International Housewares Association since 1997.

Matt Bentley of San Jose State University took first place this year with his Aqua Handwashing Station, a plastic outdoor faucet and soap dispenser that attaches to any spigot.

At the housewares show, Bentley met with companies interested in possibly manufacturing his product or employing him. Judge Michael Smith, product manager for garment care for Hamilton Beach/Procter-Silex, said Bentley's product was amazing for how obvious it was: "You wonder, 'Why didn't I think of that?'"

Another judge, Patrick Douglas, design manager for hard lines for Target, agreed, saying Bentley's concept "made you say, 'Oh ... I could use that.' It's a great, simple idea."

Sharing first-place honors with Bentley was Erik Petersen, also of San Jose State. His contribution to making life more comfortable? A better bedpan, one that is soft and warm to the touch.

Judge and KU graduate Troy Rodman, industrial design manager for Sears, Roebuck and Co., liked the concept because "there has been no advancement in that category for a long time."

Sometimes real life is an inspiration. As the father of a 4-year-old, third-place winner James C. Corbin of Columbus College of Art & Design in Ohio knew there were no lunchboxes on the market geared toward younger children.

Corbin observed kids at a daycare center to see what kinds of lunchboxes they could open and close. He also surveyed parents to find out what items they typically pack for lunch, then measured the most popular items to ensure they

would fit in his car-shaped Cool Wheels lunchbox.

Corbin's lunchbox is now being shipped in China. A prospective manufacturer is seeing whether it can be produced at a low enough price. The feedback he receives will be a valuable learning experience, he said.

Lisa Heim of Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design placed second with judges, but her Impulse Spot Remover, a hand-held instant garment cleaner, was the big winner with industry representatives.

Three major companies are competing for the rights to her product, and she expects it to be on the market by next year.

Just how bright is the future for these kids and other industrial design students around the country? Very, Smith says. He estimates that during the past 10 years job opportunities in industrial design have doubled.

"In the '80s, design was more of an afterthought. 'Here's our contraption — can you make it look better?'" Today, design is seen as a strategic advantage and is integrated into product development at the earliest stages, he said.

Also, high-profile designers such as Michael Graves and Karim Rashid, who have brought good design to Target and Bed Bath & Beyond, have raised awareness among young people that "this is a profession."

Still, industrial designers find themselves constantly having to explain what they do. "All our mothers think we design factories," Kemnitzer said. Some use the term "product designer," but that doesn't cover important areas within the profession such as interaction design for Web sites, he said.

One key development Kemnitzer has seen in the past 15 years is a steady increase in the number of women enrolling in industrial design programs.

"For a long time when the profession emerged in the '20s, it was a pretty much of a boys' club," he said. But today some of Kemnitzer's classes are almost even in terms of number of men and women.