

Pulse

THE CONNECTICUT INVENTION CONVENTION

Connecticut Invents — Then and Now

Where does the inventing spirit come from? Across the state of Connecticut every year thousands of students answer this question by becoming inventors themselves.

By Alice C. Stelzer

Connecticut has a long tradition of firsts and a look behind the scenes of these events provides a picture of what it takes to be an inventor.

Charles Goodyear epitomized the indomitable spirit of Connecticut inventors. He never profited financially from his discovery of the revolutionizing vulcanizing rubber process and his numerous patents were constantly infringed upon.

None of this killed his inventing spirit but rather, he wrote, “I am not disposed to com-

plain that I have planted and others have gathered the fruits. A man has cause for regret only when he sows and no one reaps.”

Connecticut native Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin saved the economy of the southern states but the cotton growers pirated his machine to harvest their crops. In 1804, he returned to New Haven, and invented the milling machine and techniques for manufacturing that revolutionized industries.

THE INVENTING SPIRIT

Why do individuals continue when everything is against them? Where does this

In 2001, there were 2,070 new patents issued in Connecticut. That calculates to 605 patents per each million inhabitants, placing Connecticut higher than the New England or national average.



inventing spirit come from?

Across the state of Connecticut every year thousands of students answer these questions by becoming inventors themselves. They are being given this opportunity to explore their instinctive talents to invent by the Connecticut Invention Convention (CIC) program.

For 20 years, CIC’s mission has been to provide the students of Connecticut with meaningful opportunities to develop and encourage creative thinking and invention, while ensuring the continuation of that spirit throughout life.

The nonprofit CIC program is run entirely by volunteers and underwritten by grants and in-kind support from community, educational institutions, business and charitable organizations.

In addition to the UConn School of Engineering, the CIC’s sustaining donors include support for over 15 years from the GE Elfun Society Greater Hartford Chapter,



United Technologies Corporation, the Connecticut Light & Power/Energy Efficiency Team, and Phoenix Investment Partners. More recently, Microsoft, and SBC/SNET have joined the ranks of corporate sponsors.

TEACHING STUDENTS TO THINK

David J. Bebrin, Senior Program Administrator Marketing and Conservation Programs, has this to say about CL&P's support, "CL&P is committed to CIC because we believe that educating our youngsters means more than the rote learning of facts and figures."

"It means teaching children how to think. CIC provides opportunities for our young people to develop creative thinking, understand the value of learning and, most important, begin to think for themselves. CL&P is proud to participate in CIC because it gives us the opportunity to influ-

ence the next generation of Thomas Edisons, ensuring new, breakthrough ideas to save energy, money and the environment."

Participating for the fourth year, SBC SNET sponsored five special awards in "technology" inventions this year. "As a company that depends upon a steady flow of new technology and innovation, SBC SNET's support of the Invention Convention makes good business sense," says **Thomas Buckley**, manager of constituency relations. "This program demonstrates just how imaginative, ingenious and productive our kids can be — our future is, indeed, in very good hands."

AN INTENT TO INVENT

The CIC process involves brainstorming about things a student would like to change or improve to make life easier. They have to complete a "intent to invent" application, write a plan naming the invention that includes what the invention is, who would use it, and when and how they would use it.

They then experiment with different designs as they create a model and develop a display. Over 10,000 students participate annually in this program, throughout a majority of Connecticut's elementary and middle schools, and for many it has become a defining educational event in their lives.

Tony Scelfo, now a junior at MIT studying computer science, participated in CIC from fifth to eighth grade. In eighth grade he was a finalist at the state convention for his Robotic Cat Feeder invention. Scelfo describes his experience, "It was a lot different than what we were doing in school. It let me be creative in a building way. I love to build. It just added a whole new aspect to school that was real important for me."

Scelfo explained that after MIT he wants a career in designing computer systems that control mechanical items, especially in automobiles. "Computer science lets me be very creative. I knew that I wanted to do this because of the time I spent in CIC. I'm taking a lot of mechanical engineering courses, and that's a direct result of CIC."

Back in 1990, **Patrick Simon** went to the state CIC finals with his invention of a flashing light unit that would assist emergency personnel in finding a house. His experience had an impact on his course of study, "It was probably one of my first experiences in converting an idea into reality and that experience has been built upon ever since that first project."

The competitions show that problem solving is a rewarding experience.

Currently a senior in the UConn School of Engineering, Simon said, "I'm studying computer programming and there's definitely a parallel with CIC. The whole problem solving idea; you come up with the initial plan and then you need to test to see if it works. If it doesn't work and you have to go in and fix your errors — that's what software engineering is all about."

Simon felt he took two major things away from his participation in CIC, "First it gave me my first experience in problem solving and I got to see there is a lot of trial and error involved and that carries over into computer programming."

"It gives you the confidence that after coming up with a problem and then solving it, you feel you can do anything and when you are given recognition, it gives you the motivation to tackle other problems. The competitions show that problem solving is a rewarding experience. Early on it is important that kids get recognized for their achievements. I still have the plaque on my wall."

With the assistance of corporate sponsors and dedicated teachers, CIC will continue providing Connecticut students with the opportunity to learn a different way of problem solving, and how to take their findings to the next steps for another 20 years.

For more information on the Connecticut Invention Convention, visit their Website at www.engr.uconn.edu/~cicweb or call (860) 793-5299. ■