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This invention's a 'shoe-in'

One-year-old sister inspired electronic gadget for laces

By **MIKE BROWN**
Reporter Editor

Necessity may be the mother of invention but Jatara Williams could be called the sister of one.

Jatara was one year old about three years ago when her 9-year-old brother, Joel Jr., noticed the tyke had put her shoes on the wrong feet.

And that got Joel thinking that maybe a little high-tech could help young kids learn which shoes go on which feet.

The Williams family does more than think. Dad Joel Sr., a research and development specialist for Wilsonart in Temple, stepped in to help. Today the Williams' "smart buttons" are telling thousands of kids the right (and left) way to put on their shoes.

Family tradition

Success is a Williams family tradition. Joel Sr. is a member of the famous John and Mildred Williams Family of Griffin Chapel.

The Williamses fielded several track and field champs, and made numerous state track meet appearances, for Milano High School, even though Milano doesn't have a track.

Joel Sr. appeared at the Class A state track meet three times, competing in the long jump, high jump and 330-yard intermediate hurdles. "It was so long ago they were still measuring in yards," he joked.

The family lives in Troy and Joel Jr. will begin the seventh grade in Travis Middle School, Temple, next month.

What was Joel Jr. thinking when he got his idea for the smart buttons. "I was just looking at her and thinking, 'you know if those shoes could talk, they could help her,'" he said.

Joel Sr. set about helping his son make those shoes talk.

Connections

"You can do so many things with electronic chips," Joel Sr. said. "We thought about getting recordable chips, one for each shoe, saying "this is my left shoe" and "this is my right shoe."

Joel Sr. had the connections, and the drive, to make it happen. "Turned out that China was the place to get them made more affordable," he said. "Cost in the U. S. was just prohibitive."

They've already applied for a patent, an application that protects the invention from being copied.

If the electronics part of smart buttons is complicated, the operational part isn't. "Buttons go on the laces and stay on the shoes," Joel Jr. said. "When the kid wants to know what shoe it is, they punch the button and a voice will tell you 'this is my right shoe' or 'this is my left shoe.'"

"Of course it's up to the parents to get them attached to the correct shoes in the first place," Joel Sr. said.

Spongebob

The buttons are good for many thousands of pushes, Joel Sr. said. They are available in blue for boys, pink for girls and white for either gender. There's also a Spanish language version.



Reporter/Mike Brown

Joel Williams Jr., and inspirational sister Jatara, show off "smart-button shoes," (pink for girls and blue for boys) while proud parents Joel Sr. and Jessica look on.

Currently the buttons are available on the Williams' web site www.smartbuttonshoes.com.

"It's been out about two months and we've already sold a couple of thousand pair," Joel Sr. said.

There are all kinds of exciting possibilities for the future. The

family has attended the World Shoe Accessories convention in Las Vegas and has made contacts in all kinds of places.

"We've talked to some pretty big names like Disney, Nickelodeon, LA Footgear, Nike" Joel Sr. said.

Disney may be interested in putting its characters on the buttons.

"Who knows?" Joel Sr. added. "Maybe some day you'll push one of our buttons and Spongebob Squarepants will say 'this is my right shoe!.'"