

12-year-old invents shoe aid

Inspiration for device came from little sister

By SARA HENRETTY

Although he is only 12 years old, Joel Williams Jr. of Troy already stands in the company of giants such as Thomas Edison and Benjamin Franklin.

Like Edison and Franklin, Joel is an inventor.

Joel, who will be a seventh-grader at Travis Middle School in Temple in August, invented the SmartButton, a device that tells children which shoe goes on which foot.

"I came up with the idea for the SmartButton when I saw my sister putting her shoes on the wrong feet," Joel said. "I thought maybe I should invent something, so I talked to dad and we thought we could find something to work."

The device is about the size of a silver dollar and has an electronic chip inside that, when pressed, tells children if the shoe is their "left" or "right" foot.

Joel Williams Sr. works for Wilsonart International as a research engineer. Williams said they did some research to see if anyone else had come up with a similar invention.

"From the research we've done, there was no other patent like this on the market," Williams said.

"One company made buttons with a sticker that pointed left or right, but no one else had an electronic device. It's a novel idea," he said.

After a couple of years of drawing and designing, production of the SmartButton began.

Williams said they looked for a manufacturer in the U.S., but production costs were too high. After choosing a Chinese manufacturer, Joel was able to sell his invention online.

"We've been selling a lot of the product on the Web site," Williams said. "It's been out about two months, and we've already sold a couple thousand pair."

The SmartButton is not available in stores yet, but customers can order a pair at www.smart-buttonshoes.com.

The product, which sells for \$9.95 a pair, comes in three colors: white, pink and blue, and two languages: Spanish and English.

"We plan to make products with male and female voices, too," Williams said. "We're still in the early stages of the project."

They applied for a patent about a year ago, and Williams said the paperwork, which usually takes about 18 months, should be completed soon.

"Our attorney said (the SmartButton) was unique enough to receive a patent," Williams said. "He said we would probably have a patent within the next six months."

Williams introduced Joel's invention at a 2005 World Shoe Association convention in Las Vegas. Williams said companies such as Nike, LA Footwear, Nickelodeon and Disney seemed impressed with the product.

"We had really positive feedback," Williams said. "Disney wanted to purchase the buttons and put characters on them."

Joel said he has been invited to a second World Shoe Association convention in February, and Williams said Joel would go with him to Las Vegas this time.

"I hope we find people who will take (the SmartButton) in," Joel said. "I hope I can get it into Wal-Mart because everybody shops at Wal-Mart."

Williams said they plan to invest the profit money and save it for Joel's college tuition.

"Our main goal is to have money for Joel to go to college, but he would like to use some of the money to fund his other projects," Williams said.

Not only does Joel enjoy his science and writing classes,



Joel Williams, 12, poses beside children's shoes with the SmartButton attached at his residence in Troy. He will be a seventh-grader at Travis Middle School in Temple this fall. Joel was inspired to create SmartButtons after watching his 3-year-old sister put the wrong shoe on her wrong foot. (Photo by Andrew Nenque)

he also plays the piano and saxophone and will start football in the fall. He said all his friends at school know about his invention.

"They all think it's cool," Joel said. "They've tried to invent stuff, too."

Eddy McNamara, principal of Travis Middle School, said everyone was very proud of Joel for his accomplishments.

"He is a very inventive young man and very dedicated to his studies," Mrs. McNamara said. "He will go far."

So far, Joel has not decided where he will go to college, but he has talked becoming an Imagineer, an employee at Walt Disney who develops ideas and attractions for the Disney parks.

"I think it would be fun to work as an Imagineer," he said.