

From problem to opportunity

■ Kelly Cannings' hair used to drive her crazy. Now her Wispees are keeping the hair out of everyone else's eyes

By STEVE MacNAULL
The Daily Courier

Playing university basketball, Kelly Cannings tried everything to keep her hair out of her eyes.

Ponytails, regular headbands, bandanas, even sports tape rolled into a sticky strip that did hold hair in place but created one heck of a tangled mess when pulled off.

"I knew there had to be a better way, so I started to work on one," says Cannings, now 27.

"The prototype headband I came up with was actually made with shelf liner paper that holds in place without being sticky. Then I came across breathable neoprene, the fabric that wetsuits are made of, and it made the perfect non-slip headband."

That was three years ago and the product was called Wispee because it kept those annoying wisps of hair out of your eyes.

Since then, Cannings has had Wispee patented, licensed a manufacturer-distributor to make it and has seen 20,000 Wispees sell in about seven months.

"20,000 units for a new product is extremely good," says Cannings.

"In three years, if Wispee performs as per plan, we'll be on our way to early retirement."

Since attending the University College of the Cariboo in Kamloops, Cannings has gotten married and now has a 17-month-old child.

Cannings has a non-disclosure agreement with the manufacturer, so she can't reveal how much she's made so far.

However, she does say she is paid a royalty on every Wispee sold.

The manufacturer is U.S.-based Pro Marx, a company that makes many similar products such as scrunchies, hair ribbons and bows and other types of headbands.

It also makes sleeve ties, tote bags, pillow shams and towels.

The products are sold on line at promarx.com and in sports stores all over the U.S.

While the products can be bought retail at stores, Pro Marx will also make items in team colours to supply high schools, colleges, sports teams and cheerleading squads.

The Wispee retails for \$4.99 to \$7.99 and is cur-

Good inventions

Consultant Vincent Kehoe says the Wispee "is not the cure for cancer, but it is a great product."

And the Wispee fits the criteria for an invention becoming a viable consumer item.

■ It serves a purpose and solves a problem.

■ It has a good profit margin. It can be made for \$1 and sold for \$5.

■ The potential market is big. Aimed at half the population - women - who face the problem of keeping wisps of hair out of their eyes during sports, workouts, washing their face, having a spa treatment or as a fashion statement.

■ The Wispee is a headband, but sets itself apart by having the non-slip breathable neoprene.

■ It has a patent, which makes it marketable and protected as new and different.



GARY NYLANDER/The Okanagan Saturday

Kelly Cannings of Kelowna invented the non-slip Wispee headband, which doesn't allow any wisps of hair to get loose.

rently only available at retail outlets in the U.S. or on line by checking promarx.com.

While Cannings did most of the product development and testing and patent search work herself, she did hire Kelowna-based consultant Vincent Kehoe to tee up the manufacturing agreement.

"I first approached Adidas and they turned us

down," says Kehoe of Innovative Licensing & Promotion.

"Then we found Pro Marx, which is a good fit because it already makes similar products and it is not just a manufacturer, but a marketer and a distributor that has a good relationship with sports stores all over the U.S."