

"If a man can write a better book, preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, though he builds his house in the woods, the world will make a beaten path to his door."

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ask Steve Williams about the stereotypical daffy inventor, and his response comes quick and biting.

"They're not all eccentric," the Department of Economic Development business assistance director says. "You'll find very few of those wacko inventor-in-the-garage types.

"... Really, inventors are interesting and very imaginative people."

As the overseer of a database of Nebraska patents, Williams has helped many reporters seek out interesting inventors.

But he's the first to admit his perspective of which inventors are "interesting" may not be what feature writers are looking for.

"I think they're all interesting," he says, refusing to point out any "wackos" on the list he's printing of inventors from the Nebraska patent database.

And picking out the wackos on Williams' printout wasn't easy. In fact, most of the inventions listed, from a Christmas tree waterer to a new contraceptive, sounded perfectly legitimate.

Maybe Williams purged the daffy ones before he made the printout. Or maybe the daffy ones just weren't there to begin with.

Whatever the case, there are no stereotypical wackos in this Sower. Perhaps that means the stereotype of inventors is about as accurate as most stereotypes.

What this issue does contain are the stories of just a handful of the hundreds of interesting Nebraska inventors in recent years.

In all, Williams said, 1,450 patents, or about 140 a year, have been awarded to Nebraskans since 1977. Half of those patents are awarded to people who live outside the Lincoln-Omaha area.

The inventors we talked to have their own perceptions of what inventing is about. And none of their views are stereotypical.

Take, for example, the creators of the Quick-Grip Bar Clamp, Joe Sorensen and Dwight Gatzemeyer.

Despite Quick-Grip's success, Gatzemeyer said he doesn't consider himself an inventor.

"An inventor is one who does it full time. I'm a tool-and-die maker," he said. "We were just at the right place at the right time."

And Sorensen had his own piece to say about inventors.

"An inventor seeks out problems," he said. "If he comes up with a solution to the problems, that's his livelihood."

Most people take problems for granted and don't stop to think about solutions, he

said.

"It's important for me to visualize the situation I want to have," Sorensen said, "then start to take steps to make it happen. Just believing you can improve things is important.

"Inventors are people who are willing to look at things with a fresh perspective... You've got to train yourself to look for other ideas, perspectives," Sorensen said. "Just make a decision to look at things differently."

Williams said the inventors he has worked with are "individualists, imaginative and stubborn.

"They know what problem they're fixing. This could be a positive or a negative trait," depending on how much homework they've done on the need for their invention, he said.

Sometimes inventors "lose track of the perspective on the value of their invention," Williams said, "and whether or not the world's really waiting for their invention."

"That's where the importance of feedback comes in," Sorensen said. "The biggest problem with those who want to be inventors is they lose their sense of objectivity.

"It's hard to be objective about what you're doing, so it's important to have people whose opinion you value to give you feedback."

Gatzemeyer said perseverance is important for inventing, as well as a realistic evaluation of the invention.

"If you've got an idea and think it's good," he said, "you should stay with it. But keep it simple. Don't make it complicated. You've got to consider that manufacturers are concerned about production costs."

Williams said the first step to successful inventing "is to decide if the invention just satisfies the inventor's curiosity or if this invention has a market to sell it to."

And Sorensen said taking risks is part of being an inventor.

"I know people, inventors, who had a lot of money, but went broke because they were willing to take risks for their inventions," Sorensen said. "They may spend half a million dollars on tooling and wind up not being able to sell their invention.

"But they're persistent enough to see their idea through, even if it does mean taking risks. They've been broke, but they've been wealthy too."



— Jana Pedersen
Senior Editor
and Pat Dinslage
Staff Reporter