

Science

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project, said research has shown that grades four through six, the level of interest in science is about equal for boys and girls.

After that age, she said, girls clearly lose that interest and don't choose to take science classes when they get the opportunity.

"We want to make an impression on

girls while they are still taking science," Diamond said.

Diamond, who is the assistant director for public programs and an associate professor at the University of Nebraska State Museum, said as children grow up, all they see around them are male scientists.

"Many girls are never given role models of female scientists," she said.

The kits will try to change that. They will use videotapes about the lives and work of the featured scien-

tists and hands-on activity books with materials. Interactive CD-ROMS will be included in three of the five kits.

The Wonderwise Project was funded in 1992 through a five-year grant for \$500,000 from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

The kits will be distributed free of charge to 150 teachers across Nebraska. Educators serving as resource mentors for each of the units are learning to use the kits at a workshop this week at UNL.

Rural inventor builds tree, big business

By Lori Robison
Staff Writer

For many Americans, Nebraska seems synonymous with college football, corn fields and grain silos.

However, these traditional perceptions of Nebraska may soon have to be adjusted — if only slightly — to include plastic palm trees.

When Dennis Biehl's father, a Lexington farmer, got into his sun-baked vehicle on a summer day in 1988, he just about burned his hands on the steering wheel.

There were very few shade trees on Biehl's farm, so he decided to do something unusual to keep his truck from becoming a sweltering oven after sitting in the sun a few hours.

He made his own shade tree.

"He said he was tired of parking on 40 acres of asphalt with no shade," said Biehl, owner and operator of the Courtesy Shade Tree Company and a Lexington farmer himself, "so he invented his own tree."

Believing that his idea had potential, Biehl's father, who died two years ago, soon applied for and received a patent for his creation.

After receiving the patent, the father and son team presented their plastic tree to the public during the Northeast Nebraska Inventor's Show — and won first place.

However, Biehl said although his father thought the tree was "the greatest thing since sliced bread," he still had his doubts about the strange creation.

Made almost entirely from fiberglass and standing over 9-feet tall, the 150-pound palm tree needs no maintenance, soil or water and can be permanently attached to a concrete base.

In addition, the artificial tree can be disassembled and reassembled in less time than an average swing set and comes in a variety of colors.

Biehl said when his father first mentioned the tree to him, he thought he was "crazy."

"I laughed and said that it will never work," Biehl said.

But Biehl admits his attitude changed after he and his father attended the National Invention Con-

vention in Pasadena, Ca. It was there that Biehl began to suspect that his father's idea might actually catch on.

There were questions about tree rentals for parties, Biehl said, as well as inquiries regarding possible permanent poolside attachments, props for window displays, and shade for customers of outdoor cafes.

Pleasantly surprised by the enthusiastic interest shown at the convention in Pasadena, Biehl went alone to the National Association of Display Islands Convention in New York City.

It was a first for Biehl, who had never been to New York City before and, up until the convention, had never seen the palm tree fully assembled, much less tried to sell one.

But the four-day convention yielded numerous orders for the tree, Biehl said, from businesses such as Sak's Fifth Avenue, Sears and a few European companies.

However, seeing an idea from conception to production also proved to be a frustrating experience.

Weeks after forwarding the numerous orders for the trees placed during the New York convention to the manufacturer, Biehl discovered that none of his orders would be filled.

"It just about killed us," Biehl said, "but that's part of the risk you take."

Two years later, after contracting Shell Valley Fiberglass in Platte Center to fill future orders, Biehl is back in the business of supplying the plastic trees to his customers.

"It's time to get serious about this," Biehl said.

Biehl recently hired an engineering intern from UNL to help with his business.

In addition, Biehl was also searching for a finance and a marketing intern to help find ways to lower production costs and improve marketing strategies.

Future adjustments to the original design, according to Biehl, include a lighter tree for indoors and a heavy-duty tree, able to withstand winds up to 80 mph, for outdoor use.

"People laugh about the tree the first time they see it," Biehl said. "Then, they shake their heads and start to ask me questions about it."

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Walters

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"just come to him," as opposed to planning photos.

Walters' work is displayed throughout Lincoln. A series of photographs he described as "distracted youth" were recently displayed at the Coffee House.

The photographs were meant to

express how American behavior evolves around love and acting sexy, Walters said.

Walters, who develops and prints his own photographs, said he was captivated with color film. He now refuses to photograph in anything but color.

His reason is simple enough.

"When you look out your window, you don't see black and white," Walters said.

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