

VANCE HAS ANSWER FOR MEDICAL WASTE

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Murry Vance's storybook break came, as most seem to, by accident.

A welder he hired didn't show. Vance faced a deadline for delivery of a stainless-steel dumpster to a customer who hauled medical waste. Desperate, Vance took his first crack at welding.

As he worked, Vance became fascinated by the technology, the way the torch's electrons and gas combined to first destroy the metal and then fuse it. Then he thought: "Wouldn't it be better to eliminate medical waste rather than haul it around?"

Just then his wife, Janice, entered the shop. A nurse coming from work, she had a syringe and a bottle of saline in her lab coat.

"I took the syringe and the little bottle and put it on a metal plate and hit it with that tig torch," Vance recalled, his voice quickening. "It basically disintegrated the syringe and the bottle. And that started the whole thing."

Environmental regulators and business associates say Vance and his startup company, Vance IDS Inc., may be on the verge of hitting it big.

Soon Vance will test the Incandescent Disposal System sitting on the production floor of his Altamonte Springs plant. This is the sixth of its kind but perhaps the most important because it's the first production model.

Results of the performance tests, which are to be conducted under the watchful eyes of environmental regulators, can solidify Vance's claims that his invention provides the environmentally safe alternative to medical-waste incineration.

Concerns about dioxin and other toxic air emissions spurred the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency last year to crack down on medical-waste incinerators, creating opportunities for emerging technologies. Florida regulators estimate that within three years, nearly all hospitals, clinics and blood banks will have to find new ways to dispose of their infectious wastes.

"It's got to go somewhere," said Eric Grimm from the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Vance hopes that it goes into his machine.

From the first day that he zapped the contents of his wife's pockets in 1990, Vance began experimenting with different kinds of welding torches and ways to increase the efficiency of the disintegration.

In a series of trial-and-error experiments, he hit upon a process that combines electrons from the torches with argon gas. The resulting electrical plasma melts wastes into harmless residues. Because the waste is superheated but not burned - a process that requires oxygen, not argon gas - the reaction is virtually pollution-free.

Despite what colleagues say are gifts for engineering, design, business and chemistry, Vance holds no four-year degree after more than a decade of university work.

"He's a highly motivated, brilliant individual," said Bob Smith, a director of Vance IDS and a longtime business associate and friend.

"He's not an engineer, but he'll sit down at a (computer-aided design) machine and design something and give you finished blueprints. Give him an idea, and he'll come back with something a little better."

Vance holds 24 separate design patents, covering truck chassis, boat hulls and medical-waste incinerators.

Vance's first venture into self-employment came in 1979, when his employer, a large-truck maker, dropped a profitable but low-volume line of customized work trucks. As salesman of the line, Vance began producing a modified truck, which he said became profitable once divorced of the larger company's overhead.

Business for the specialized trucks was good, eventually leading Vance to expand to four plants by mid-1985, with one in Orlando, designing aviation fuel trucks.

A frustrating run saw him patent and unsuccessfully market a number of inventions, including a small boat. Various deals fell through, and Vance hit a personal low point in 1988 when he filed for Chapter 13, personal bankruptcy.

"Which was a mistake - I should have allowed the company to go (Chapter) 11 and keep me personally alive," he said. "The company, I felt, was more important. I didn't care if I was successful or not as long as the company was. I didn't realize at the time that when it's a small company, they're one in the same."

Vance eventually closed the truck business and sold some engineering in the wake of the bankruptcy. The proceeds helped start Vance IDS, his current venture.

The latest Murry Vance is also a better, more seasoned entrepreneur, associates say. Exhibit 1: A board of directors helps Vance run the company, which has 35 employees and about 150 shareholders.

"It's hard to design it, build it, market it and be the ultimate wizard," Smith said. "Now he's surrounding himself with people who can help him achieve his goals."

The electric power industry is promoting Vance's technology along with other emerging ones to hospitals, some of its largest customers.

Vance has more marketing savvy than many of the green inventors the industry deals with, said Joe Nestor, manager of market planning for Florida Power & Light.

"Maybe that's why he's doing better than some of the others we've talked to," Nestor said. "He's already failed."

Vance says he is more single-goal focused than in years past. Although, truth be told, the inventor still holds a secret desire to market the small boat he designed but could never sell.

"It's a nice little boat," he said, smiling at the thought. "You'd want it if you saw it."

Today, Vance IDS has no debt and more than \$30 million in back orders. Depending on the outcome of the tests, the company could soon receive more than \$100 million in additional business.

Vance is pursuing joint ventures with large manufacturers to help meet the expected demand for his disposer. Everything hinges on the upcoming tests, which Vance dismisses as a fait accompli.

Things are going well enough at Vance IDS that the company president recently tried to hire another welder to speed production. As fate would have it, it was the same guy whose no-show spurred Vance to pick up a welding torch.

"He didn't show up," Vance chortled. "Typical."

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