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Pedal power courtesy of a local firm

By Phyl Newbeck

For The Colchester Sun

Eight years ago on his way home from a business trip to California, Ken Torino found himself stranded in Chicago. With his flight to Burlington cancelled, he took out his cell phone in an attempt to rebook and was told he was 79th in line. Unfortunately, as the numbers counted down, Torino began to hear the telltale beeping indicating that his battery was dying. The cell phone died just as he was nearing the front of the line. Once home, Torino looked for a convenient portable generator which would have prevented that problem. Finding none, he decided to invent one himself.



Torino holds his hand-cranked generator on top of Mount Mansfield.

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Torino retired after 30 years at IBM as a mid-level executive and development engineer and in June of 2008 he founded K-Tor. The company's tag-line is "human energy; the new face of alternative energy." The first few years were spent doing

research and development, but two and a half years ago, the company began selling a hand-cranked generator. Torino's dream was to create a pedal-powered generator but he recognized that it would be easier to launch his new company with a smaller product. This year he was able to introduce a portable pedal-powered generator called the Power Box, which can produce up to 20 watts.

Torino said his company is doing well but noted that being first is always a challenge because you have to create your own market. "I'm convinced it's a great idea," he said of his new product, "and in 10-20 years it should be everywhere, but the challenge is telling people about it." Obviously, advertising is one way to raise awareness but advertising costs money, which requires sales. Torino said local companies like Ben & Jerry and Vermont Teddy Bear are viewed as overnight successes but each one needed a decade to take hold.

Torino wanted to build a portable pedal-powered generator because pedaling is a comfortable motion that can be done for a long period of time. He said existing pedal-powered generators were the size of exercise bikes and cost \$600 whereas his model retails for \$220, weighs less than five pounds and is the size of a shoebox. Although the company has come up with ideas for use of the product, they are counting on prospective customers to help with additional inspiration. Torino said the Power Box is being installed in paddleboats since long-term use can drain their batteries, and he has heard about people taking them on safaris, as well as stockpiling them for emergency preparedness.

Ideally K-Tor would like to market their generators to people in developing nations. "There are two billion people in the world without electricity," Torino said. "It costs them 20 cents to a dollar to charge their cell phones so they would recoup the cost quite quickly." K-Tor has been successful in selling some hand cranks to developing nations and Torino hopes to continue those efforts with the Power Box.

Torino has lived in Colchester for over three decades and all three of his sons went through the Colchester School District. Although the generators are built in California, they are brought to Colchester for final inspection. K-Tor's hand cranks have been shipped all over the world and used for activities as diverse as African safaris and Himalaya climbing treks, and Torino hopes his new product will find similar uses. "There are a lot of people out there with lots of ideas," he said. "There are lots of things that people can do with it."

