

Entrepreneur Discovers You're Never Too Young to Make a Difference



AT A GLANCE

Background

At an age when most young people are just beginning to explore their own identity, TJ Evarts invented the SMARTwheel™, a product that may well alleviate one of the nation's leading traffic problems: teens who text and drive.

Growing up FIRST®

Involved with FIRST for more than half his life, TJ says the experience played a major role in shaping who he is today. From FIRST, he gained knowledge and a toolbox of real-world skills — such as teamwork, how to pitch a product or idea, how to solve problems, and public speaking — that gave him a big head start in his career. FIRST inspired TJ to want to help others and taught him he was never too young to make a difference.

Young Entrepreneur is Paving His Own Path

TJ is motivated by the excitement of being an entrepreneur, which he likens to being on a roller coaster. The ups and downs help him learn how the business world works. He plans to build his own dreams, and envisions a college degree and additional businesses in his future.

Background

TJ Evarts is a dreamer. He's an inventor. He's an entrepreneur. And he's been at it since he was a young child. FIRST®, he says, had more than a passing influence on his life — it has become a lifestyle that defines who he is today.

At 13, an age when most young people are just beginning to explore their own identity, TJ invented a product that may well alleviate one of the nation's leading traffic problems: teens who text and drive. Today, the 20-year-old entrepreneur and inventor of the SMARTwheel™ — an interactive, electronic steering wheel cover that senses driver hand position and provides instant feedback to discourage distracted driving practices — says he and his colleagues from FIRST® LEGO® League team "The Inventioneers" wanted to do something to reduce the shocking statistics about teens who text and drive. And, so, they did.

He credits the 2009 FIRST LEGO League Challenge, Smart Move, as the impetus behind the idea for SMARTwheel. Once team members began their research, they were shocked to discover the scope of the problem and the lack of solutions to prevent it. However, the real inspiration behind their invention was the opportunity to create a lifesaving product for their peers.

Growing up FIRST®

The SMARTwheel is just one of TJ's many successes with FIRST. A native of Londonderry, New Hampshire, TJ connected with FIRST in 2004, when he founded "The Inventioneers" at the age of 9. In 2010, the team won the FIRST LEGO League World Festival 1st Place Champion's Award. In 2011, TJ joined FIRST® Robotics Competition Team "PVC Pirates" and was promoted to Team Captain in his second year, leading the team to a Regional Chairman's Award that same year. He was a recipient of the coveted FIRST Dean's List Award in 2012.

Involved with FIRST for more than half his life, TJ says the organization has played a major role in shaping who he is today, adding that FIRST provided him with the knowledge and a toolbox of skills that gave him a big head start in his career.

TJ's experiences with FIRST Robotics Competition gave him the industry expertise and leadership abilities needed in the corporate world — competencies that proved to be essential during the prototyping and development process of the SMARTwheel.

"It's where I learned half of the computer languages I know and work with today, as well as design and fabrication skills," he said, adding that FIRST teaches that helping others is one of the most noble, moral, and admirable goals in society. "These principles and the accompanying world view are now a permanent part of me."

"It's important to give students outside opportunities to explore, excel, and make mistakes. And help students to take initiative outside of the testing environment."

— TJ EVARTS, DREAMER, INNOVATOR, ENTREPRENEUR, AND CEO OF SMARTWHEEL

What is SMARTwheel?

Studies have shown that texting is an addictive behavior and over 70 percent of teen drivers admit to texting while driving.

The SMARTwheel snaps onto a steering wheel like any standard steering wheel cover. It uses a patented sensing technology to encourage a safe hand position that helps drivers stay focused while on the road. Unlike devices that simply record vehicle data, SMARTwheel technology provides real-time feedback via visual and audio alerts that helps drivers recognize common distracted driving behaviors — such as texting, eating, applying makeup, etc. — and allows the driver to correct those behaviors before a potential accident. The device also comes with a companion mobile application so parents can monitor their teens' driving behaviors. SMART stands for Safe Motorist Alert for Restriction Texting, Tweeting, Typing, Touchscreens, Takeout, or Touchup.

In addition to numerous awards and accolades received during the product development process for SMARTwheel, TJ and his colleagues garnered an endorsement from President Obama, who said he wanted one for his daughters. They also successfully presented the product on ABC TV's "Shark Tank," and displayed SMARTwheel at the 2016 Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. SMARTwheel has been featured on the "Today Show," MSNBC, Popular Science, Popular Mechanics, Inventors Digest, GizMag, Mashable, and national TV show "Innovation Nation" sponsored by The Henry Ford Museum. SMARTwheel has also been recognized by regional and national branches of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and former Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood.

Learn more about SMARTwheel at www.smartwheelusa.com.

www.firstinspires.org

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Real-World Lessons

From FIRST, TJ learned real-world skills. His experience taught him "how to work with a diverse group of people, how to pitch a product or an idea, and how to solve problems both mechanically and with software, as well as public speaking skills and professionalism."

Although FIRST taught him many things, perhaps the most important is that he learned that he was never too young to make a difference. He said kids gravitate toward things that allow them to make a difference, and that can be challenging in the test-based environment of today's schools. "It's important to give students outside opportunities to explore, excel, and make mistakes. And help students to take initiative outside of the testing environment," he added.



TJ Evarts (third from right) and his FIRST LEGO League team, "The Inventioneers"

An Entrepreneurial Edge

Today, TJ says he is motivated by the excitement of being an entrepreneur, and adds that through his experiences with SMARTwheel, he's been able to meet people he otherwise wouldn't have at his young age — like CEOs of billion dollar companies.

Although he was motivated from an early age to develop the SMARTwheel product, TJ says there were times when he thought about quitting. "One of the hardest things about being an entrepreneur is the roller coaster aspect. The highs and lows. When you are on the 'Today Show,' it's a high, and then when an investor says 'No,' it's a low, and it seems like the end of the world." But, ultimately, says TJ, these ups and downs gave him an opportunity to learn how the business world works.

Paving His Own Path

As for where he'll be in 10 years, TJ says he expects to be on his second or third business. College is also in his future. Although he can't say exactly when, TJ does plan to pursue a degree, perhaps in one of the schools in which he has already been accepted. TJ feels the time after high school is ripe for exploring big ideas because an existing support system is available, "you haven't been tainted by traditional corporate 9-to-5 mentality, there is little risk involved, and your creativity and energy are at an all-time high. Most of all, people want to help you succeed. I don't see any negatives with college. I just need time to consider it and I know it will be something in my future."

TJ says he would find it difficult to work for someone else, mainly because he "has been blessed with the opportunity to make a difference in the world at a young age." TJ cites the adage, "If you don't build your own dream, someone else will hire you to build theirs," and says he has many other ideas up his sleeve to explore in the future.

