

Inventor lifts waterfront living to new heights



ken
hey

LARRY GEL PHOTO

By HEATHER MILLER
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Getting your boat out on the water should be as easy as taking your car out of the garage. At least that's Ken Hey's vision for waterfront homeowners who often view boating as a big "event."

"When I moved to Lake Washington, I wanted to use my boat like a taxi, zip over to Kirkland and avoid the freeways," he said.

But Hey's existing boat lift was slow and cumbersome, making it difficult to get his boat in and out of the water quickly and easily.

An inventor at heart, Hey called on his past experience in aerospace engineering. Having sold five patents for engine mounts to Boeing, he knew he could tackle his boat lift inefficiencies using similar technology.

"Instead of a lift that was manual or took several minutes to go up and down, I invented the Sun Lift, which allows you to operate it remotely, takes just 15 seconds and is as easy as opening your garage door," Hey said. The battery of the aptly named Sun Lift is charged with solar power.

Hey was satisfied with keeping his handy

invention to himself until a neighbor — now an employee of the company — encouraged him to build another one. When everyone in his waterfront neighborhood began asking for a lift, Hey thought he might have a viable business opportunity on his hands. He and his wife Deborah co-founded Sunstream Corp., and took his design to the Seattle Boat Show. At that time, they could build one Sun Lift a month; his goal was to sell five.

"We were all shocked to find we walked away from the show with a six-year backlog," he said. "We realized we were on to something big."

That was 1997. Today, the 36-year-old is the president and CEO of a multi-million dollar business that has grown tenfold in the past two years. He expects the rapid expansion to continue.

While financial success is definitely exciting, Hey's true rewards come from maximizing other people's enjoyment.

"The boat lift is far less technical than an aerospace design, but the people who have them are so animated about it," Hey said. "It gives me a tremendous sense of satisfaction to see that people who live on the lake are actually using it, not just looking at it."

Book on your nightstand:
Joining the Entrepreneurial Elite.

Lesson learned the hard way:

Plan for business success, but spend to today's reality. During the startup phase of a business, be more concerned about revenue stream than picking out cool office equipment.

Biggest challenge facing your company:

We only hire the people we consider to be 9s or 10s. This is becoming increasingly more difficult as we grow.

Favorite music artist:

Billy Joel, who began his career in my hometown of Oyster Bay, Long Island.