Riding the wave with ecofriendly surfboards

Green Lightning Surfboards

Business: Manufacturer of surfboards out of recycled material
School: UMass Boston

By Don Seiffert | Special to the Journal

Michael Emery, 23, grew up in Haverhill, but he’s been a surfer since he decided to try to stand up on his boogie board at the age of 5.

So it was a lucky coincidence that when he was sitting in class at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill and the professor told them they had to design a business plan, he overheard the guy in back of him saying he wanted to create a snowboard company.

“I snapped my head around faster than you could see it, and said, ‘Hey man, you want to do this together?’” he said.

That man was Kevin Schoenhauer, a snowboarder from Derry, N.H., and after they met in September 2006, the two decided they wanted to form a real business, not just make a plan. The result was Green Lightning Surfboards.

Both students transferred to UMass Boston, and the business model underwent a few changes. Schoenhauer’s original idea was to make computer-enhanced surfboards that would help riders do tricks, but they soon realized that was a little out of their league.

“We quickly realized that was going to take a lot of research and development, and we don’t really have any computer expertise,” said Emery.

They eventually settled on making environmentally friendly surfboards. Emery explains that surfboards are typically made of an inner core of polyurethane foam, wrapped in fiberglass fabric and coated in polyester resin. After a lot of trial and error, Schoenhauer and Emery hit on a plan to use recycled styrofoam for the core, and wrapping it in organic hemp coated with epoxy resin derived from post-industrial wood pulp and vegetable oil.

The end result — Emery says they’re still making tweaks to the final product — will be a surfboard that’s about twice as expensive as a typical one, but is lighter and more durable. More importantly, it can be custom-made, and it’s not only made of recycled material, but is recyclable as well. That’s an important selling point, said Emery.

“You would think there’s nobody who would care more about water and the environment than surfers,” he said.

“But you’re showing you don’t care about the environment just by riding a toxic surfboard.”

The company has so far built two full-size prototypes, but it wasn’t until they won the first Entrepreneurship Center’s Business Launch Competition at UMass Boston last May that the business took off. The prize was $2,500 in cash, and $10,000 worth of legal assistance. As a result, the company became incorporated under the name Green Lightning Surfboards this summer, and is currently serving four customers.

The two recently bought the domain name greenlightsurf.com, and are currently looking to establish themselves here in New England.

Emery says now they can expand using the revenue from their own sales, but he said they’d be interested in other sources of funding down the road. For now, he’s keeping his job at Citysports, and Schoenhauer will continue working at Starbucks at least until he graduates in December.

CLASS ACTS

Colleges and universities have long been breeding grounds for innovation. In this week’s Focus, we spotlight some singular examples.

Michael Emery’s business, Green Lightning Surfboards, manufactures boards out of recycled materials.