

Don White – Can-Cocktails

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Can rural Kansas survive? Can rural Kansas compete? Can rural Kansas grow? In order to do so, rural Kansas will need entrepreneurs and community leaders to find and implement creative ideas. In fact, it might even require a concoction of things. This is today's Kansas Profile.

Don White is owner of an innovative business in eastern Kansas. He grew up in the Kansas City area and became a specialist in creating dental devices. He builds dental bridges, crowns and dentures.

In 1992, Don joined the Burns Dental Laboratory in Garnett, Kansas, so he and his family moved to Garnett. "I love it here," Don said. "It's a nice, quiet little town with a good school system and genuinely nice people." Don and his wife Siobhan settled in Garnett and had a son and two daughters.

One of their favorite forms of family recreation is canoeing. One day in 2006, Don and Siobhan were canoeing while she was trying to handle her water bottle, which wasn't easy. She stuffed the water bottle in a coozie with a strap, but there was no good way to hold it and it ended up rolling around on the floor of the canoe.

"Could you come up with something that would hold this?" she asked her husband. He took on the challenge.

Don designed a type of cup holder with a coil clip which could be clipped onto the side of the canoe. This kept his wife's hands free to paddle and kept her drink conveniently close by. Siobhan loved it. It worked so well that Don realized he could sell these products. He took his design to an engineer who produced them in bright colors and durable plastic and set up a company to market them.

He called his product the Can-panion, because it held a canned beverage or other container by the person's side like a close companion. He named his company Can-Cocktails.

In March 2007, the company set up a booth to market the Can-panions at an outdoor recreation show. On the first weekend, they sold 2,000 of them. Wow.

As the business grew, people continued to come up with creative uses for the Can-panion. Obviously the most common use was to hold a drink by clipping it onto the side of a canoe or kayak, but people have found they are handy to have on lawnchairs, mowers or wheelchairs – anywhere it would be convenient to have a drink nearby.

Then there are the non-beverage applications. Can-Panions have been used to hold small cups of paint on a ladder while painting. People have even put plant containers in them and hung them on a wall for urban gardening.

Can-cocktails does not sell the Can-panion directly to consumers, but rather produces the product and sells to major outdoor retailers for their resale. The Can-Panion can be found at major retailers such as Dick's Sporting Goods and LL Bean. An estimated 95 percent of all canoe and kayak outfitters in Missouri carry the Can-Panion. The product has gone all over the U.S. and Canada, and as far away as Ireland and Abu Dhabi. That's impressive for a company based in the rural community of Garnett, population 3,391 people. Now, that's rural.

The business is a family affair. Don's sisters Mary Kahler and Pati Wobker help with the business and his daughter does the photography. "When a major order goes out, they all pitch in to count `em out and box `em up," Don said.

Don and Siobhan's son Arthur is in the business and marketing program at K-State. In spring 2015, he encouraged his family to apply for the Launch A Business program by the Center for Entrepreneurship in the K-State College of Business and the company was selected. This initiative, supported by Kansas State Bank and others, provided training by KSU faculty for entrepreneurs plus networking and mentoring with business leaders. "The program was fantastic," Don said.

For more information about this company, go to www.can-coctions.com.

Can rural Kansas survive, compete, and grow? If we encourage ruralpreneurs like Don White who are making a difference with a creative idea and effective marketing, then I believe rural Kansas can.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.