



BUSINESS

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Lighting the way out of poverty

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Mark Bent wants to save the world with a flashlight.

The 49-year-old Houston entrepreneur intends to illuminate the Dark Continent and then work his way around the globe to help the 1.6 billion people who are living without electricity.

The owner of SunNight Solar Enterprises LLC is serious. And he wants your help.

Mr. Bent, a 1975 graduate of Carrollton's R.L. Turner High School, has patented a lightweight, water- and shock-resistant LED flashlight that can transform 10 hours of sunshine into six hours of night light.

Here in the states it's named BoGo Light for "buy one, give one." And that's the heart of his U.S. marketing plan. You buy one for \$25 on the Internet plus shipping charges from Houston, and he'll deliver a duplicate plus distribute \$1 to one of a dozen relief agencies, faith groups and philanthropic foundations.

"To us, it's a flashlight, basically a toy," Mr. Bent says. "But if you live in Africa, where you often spend 30 percent of your income on kerosene for lighting, it's a really, really big deal."

Kerosene is expensive and noxious and produces lousy lighting. It also contributes to global warming: One lantern emits 100 kilos of carbon gas fumes a year, equal to 52 vehicles in the U.S.

Mr. Bent, a former U.S. Marine, State Department diplomat and international oil executive, spent more than 20 years in Africa.

He still acts as a consultant for Perenco, a French oil exploration company, pulling down a low-six-figure salary for not much work. That frees him to spend most of his waking life on "this lighting thing."

Bending the rules

His idealism is infectious.

That's why Brad Burke, managing director of the Alliance for Technology and Entrepreneurship at Rice University, bent the rules for Mr. Bent last September.

Each year, the university's entrepreneurship center selects emerging energy and technology companies to present at its venture capital forum. Mr. Bent's company was selected from a field of 75 even though it didn't meet the criteria of having a big upside potential payoff.

"It's not the typical technology company that a venture capitalist or angel investor would invest in," Mr. Burke says.

"But from a philanthropic perspective, it looks like a product with applicability and important benefits to developing countries. That's why we selected it."

One thing led to another.

Gerald McElvy, president of the ExxonMobil Foundation in Irving, got a flashlight from the U.S. ambassador to Angola. He flew to Houston to see Mr. Bent's presentation at Rice.

The result: The foundation and Exxon Mobil Corp.'s office in Luanda, Angola, bought 7,500 flashlights for schoolchildren in that country. This pilot program may lead to flashlight distribution in other parts of Africa, Mr. McElvy says.

Last week, Mr. Bent received a container of 10,000 units from China, and another 10,000 are on their way. **Also Online**

About 500 of them are headed to Dallas as part of a viral marketing campaign that also involves churches in Austin, San Antonio and Houston.

[Learn how you can send a BoGo light to Africa](#)

Students at Rice University wrote a computer program using Google Maps so that participants can see where their flashlights came from, read the trail of comments and add theirs.

Mr. Bent wants to create Internet buzz as well as prove the gizmo works.

"People care about Africa, but they're tired of giving money away to groups and not knowing exactly where it's going," he says. "With this, they help Africa and get something pretty cool and eco-friendly."

In the last six months, he's sent 2,500 flashlights to schools and orphanages, and the United Nations distributed them to nine refugee camps.

Improvements

He discovered the flashlight needed to be rainproof and much more rugged, so he went back to China and spent an additional \$30,000 on new molds.

Since launching the company in 2005, Mr. Bent has plunked down more than \$150,000 in savings.

Without the free help he's enlisted, it would have been twice that.

A program supported by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration donated design and engineering work.

Rice students are lending a hand – literally – by unloading and loading the shipments.

Mr. Bent knows he has to get his flashlights on Third World store shelves. He has to turn a profit to sustain the cause.

"There's only so much, 'Yeah, I'm gonna help you out because I like the idea' that I can get away with. We can't join hands and sing ' *Kumbaya* ' forever."

It's only been in the last two years that technology costs of solar panels and LED (light-emitting diodes) have come down enough to make devices such as Mr. Bent's economically feasible, says Evan Mills.

Stand on its own

Dr. Mills, a staff scientist at the Department of Energy's Lawrence Livermore Laboratory in Berkeley, Calif., says Mr. Bent's flashlight could stand on its own without subsidies, charitable or government support.

If further field testing pans out, he predicts the lights may be on the shelves of small Third World general stores next to shoelaces and shampoo.

"Certainly there will be others, but I think Mark's got a great shot at it."

So does Russell Sturm, who's leading a four-year, \$7 million project at the International Finance Corp. (the private-sector investment arm of the World Bank Group) called Lighting the Bottom of the Pyramid.

"Like any idealistic entrepreneur, Mark's more naive than he'll be a year from now," Mr. Sturm says.

"It's tough being an entrepreneur, especially when you're looking at Africa as your market.

"But Mark's inspiring and inspired. He'll run on fumes to make it happen."

Mr. Bent laughs when I pass along Mr. Sturm's comments, saying he gives himself periodic reality checks. "I'm a cynical optimist."

But he likes a recent epithet bestowed on him by the Fox network affiliate in Houston: warrior diplomat.

"I told my wife: 'Dang, I like that. Stop calling me honey.' "