

Concrete Changes

Saatchi winners hope to turn world-changing ideas into real solutions

BY MAE ANDERSON



RELIEF EFFORT: William Crawford and Peter Brewin with this year's winner, the Concrete Canvas.

A glittering array of innovators and celebrities gathered at Saatchi & Saatchi's New York headquarters last month, where scientists and inventors rubbed shoulders with Moby. A pair of fresh-faced college students from the U.K. who developed a use for cement that makes temporary disaster relief shelters strong enough to last 10 years stood near rock musician Lou Reed and his wife, artist Laurie Anderson.

The slightly surreal atmosphere has become standard at the reception for Saatchi's Award for World Changing Ideas. The award, which was called the Innovation in Communication Award until 2003, is given out on a biennial basis, and this was the fourth. It was created in 1998 after the agency's worldwide creative board decided it would be a good way to launch the company's Web site and put forth the concept that Saatchi wasn't just an ad agency, but a company known for its "world-changing ideas."

"We wanted to have a Web site about content rather than just a brochure, so the man on the street would see we were at the leading

edge of communication," says Bob Isherwood, worldwide creative director at Saatchi, who helped develop the idea.

The award comes with a \$100,000 stipend. Half of that is a cash prize, and the other half is promised in marketing support by Saatchi. So far, winners include the concrete canvas shown above (this year's); a multi-diode lamp that produces cheap lighting for the developing world; a device that uses sonar energy to help the blind get around; and a touch-sensitive, putty-like conductor that activates electronic devices, such as palm pilots and TV remotes.

Criteria are simple: Ideas must demonstrate innovation in communication—often used in the loosest sense of the word—and have the potential to change the world. The first year, in keeping with the innovative criteria, the awards ceremony was broadcast live as a Webcast—practically unheard of at the time.

Entries are culled globally. Sometimes Saatchi contacts people whose ideas they believe are worth considering, but for the most part entrants submit their own ideas.

About 150 entries have been submitted for each of the four awards ceremonies, which are culled to anywhere between eight to 11 finalists. Judges evaluate entries on their own; there is no central gathering.

Finalists are wide-ranging in nature and scope. For example, in addition to Concrete Canvas, this year's finalists included solar cells that use spinach to convert sunlight into electrical energy; a plan to save the DNA of endangered species for possible reproduction in the future; Jot-a-dot, a portable Braille converter; a lens-free ophthalmoscope (offering a cheaper way to offer eye exams in developing countries); an optical stretcher that uses laser beams to detect cancer cells; a device that makes pictures 3-D so a blind person can "see" them; a device that can recharge several wireless devices simultaneously; a subvocal speech detector; and Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia anyone can edit or add to.

Judges have ranged from artist Laurie Anderson and astronaut Buzz Aldrin (on the first panel) to this year's Lou Reed, director Baz

Luhrmann, photographer Oliviero Toscani and composer Philip Glass, to name a few.

"We look for judges who are great innovators in their own right," Isherwood says.

In addition to the Award for World Changing Ideas, the ceremony also includes Edward de Bono's Medal For Thinking. This award is given out to a finalist whose idea de Bono considers "simple, practical, effective and in use," according to award show materials.

This year, the award went to the Lens-Free Ophthalmoscope. In 1998, the first award went to Joshua Silver, whose self-adjustable spectacles and vision-correcting work is making it easier for people in developing countries to have better vision. Silver applied after Saatchi contacted him to let him know about the award. He says the publicity from the award has helped make his initiative known. "I've always found [Saatchi] very supportive and pleasant. I've never really asked them for that much," he says, adding that at this point in development, it's not obvious what role the agency would play.

This year's winners, the makers of Concrete Canvas, are also grateful for the win, both the cash and the marketing support. Peter Brewin and Will Crawford, both 26, came up with the idea of concrete canvas when they were students in industrial design at London's Royal Academy of Art. They first came up with the idea two and a half years ago for a contest sponsored by the British Cement Association to come up with innovative uses for concrete.

Concrete Canvas is a bag filled with cement; when you add water and inflate the bag, it becomes a durable structure that can last for 10 years. The structure is designed as a sturdier alternative to replace easily damageable tents in places like refugee camps, and a cheaper alternative to prefab housing. The two came in second in the British competition, but continued to refine their idea.

Competing for the Award for World Changing ideas, which they found out about through their college, was an "amazing" experience, Brewin says. "There was enormously good competition," he says. "It was amazing to meet these people. We thought, 'We don't stand a chance.' We always thought the Concrete Canvas was a really strong idea, but we were certainly surprised to win."

Isherwood praises the idea as useful and timely. "Given the terrible natural disasters we had last year, I think it's a really appropriate winner," he says.

Lou Reed, one of the judges this year, says he participated in the awards because "I love the idea of the idea." The legendary musician says he voted for Wikipedia for top prize. "I thought it was a far-reaching thing for every-

one. It was right there immediately," he says.

Chris Anderson, who founded TED Conferences (about Technology, Entertainment and Design), says the Concrete Canvas idea seemed "almost magical." "It's pretty spectacular," he says. "I've spoken since with people at UNICEF and elsewhere, and the world needs new solutions to stressed-situation housing. [Concrete Canvas] is still not going to be a perfect solution to a lot of problems, but it could really make a difference."

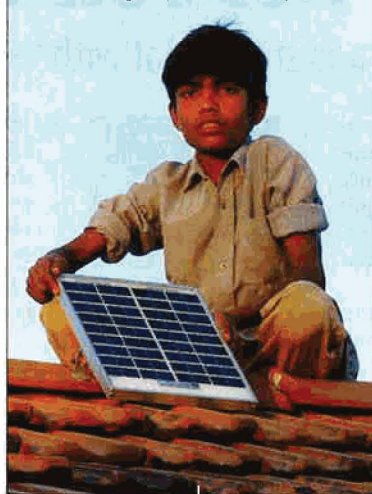
This year's winners are using the \$50,000 cash prize to get their company, Crawford Brewin, started to manufacture the product. "We're setting up development," Brewin says. "We have a huge warehouse where we're building full-scale prototypes. We have equipment we need to buy. ... We've had a pretty hand-to-mouth existence setting up our company, so the cash is incredibly useful."

However, even with the grant and marketing support, not all the winning ideas have been successful. The first year's winner, KASPA, a sonar device designed to help the blind move around easier, failed to make it to market because the device couldn't detect things below eye level, such as stairs or uneven ground.

But the winner in 2003 did make an impact after accepting the award. David Irvine-Halliday won the award for his Light Up the World Foundation. Light Up the World creates and distributes lighting systems that use low-energy, light-emitting diodes to provide cheap lighting solutions in impoverished and developing areas around the world. He applied at the urging of a board member of the University of Calgary, where he is a professor of engineering. At first he didn't believe his initiative fit the criteria of the award, but he applied anyway, since better lighting systems can improve reading, literacy and ultimately communication.

After winning, Irvine-Halliday used the cash prize to help implement the system in over 10,000 homes in 30 countries worldwide. And after the tsunami, Irvine-Halliday organized a drive to raise money to implement the system in emergency villages in Sri Lanka. Saatchi donated \$50,000 to the effort. Irvine-Halliday recently returned from Afghanistan, where he saw women

2003: An Indian boy installs a solar panel, part of the Light Up the World project.



doing crafts, such as embroidery, late into the night by the light of kerosene lamps, which are much more expensive than his lighting system. He is trying to find grants to implement the system there.

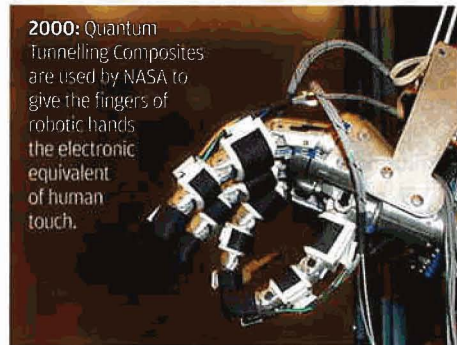
Irvine-Halliday has been pleased with winning. "This is a world-class award, there's no question about it," Irvine-Halliday says. "[Prize money of] \$50,000, that was a huge amount. We can do a heck of a lot with that. You try your best to leverage it."

Isherwood looks forward to keeping the Award for World Changing Ideas going. The agency has been able to continue working with some of the judges on other proj-

1998: KASPA mimics the sonar capabilities of bats and collects information for blind wearers.



2000: Quantum Tunnelling Composites are used by NASA to give the fingers of robotic hands the electronic equivalent of human touch.



ects. They've had discussions with one-time judge Arno Penzias, a big-bang theory researcher, about where technology is going. And they hired one of the finalists from the first year, Ji Lee, who created a 3-D alphabet, as an art director in the New York office.

But the most important benefit of the awards? "It's just great to be able to help bring world attention to ideas that might otherwise be overlooked," Isherwood says.