

Sleeping Better With \$250,000

10-YEAR-OLD'S INVENTION WINS NATIONWIDE CONTEST

BY EDITH G. TOLCHIN

SOMETIMES when you're a smart kid, you come up with solutions for everyday problems. Imagine that you have a fear of lightning and thunder. What would you do? Put your pillow or blanket over your head and risk suffocating?

Frito-Lay's annual nationwide Dreamvention contest (dreamvention.com) was the perfect place for (now) 11-year-old Julia Luetje to enter her invention, The Storm Sleeper. Julia, from Leawood, Kansas, was one of two \$250,000 grand-prize winners. (The other was Andrew Young, who invented the "Toaster Shooter" that shoots toast directly onto a plate, avoiding burnt fingers.)

The Storm Sleeper is a creative, safe way to shelter a sleepy child from storms. We spoke with Susan Bernstein—Julia's mom—who, by the way is the daughter of another innovator, Bob Bernstein. He invented the McDonald's Happy Meal.

Edith G. Tolchin (EGT): Tell us about the Frito-Lay Dreamvention contest and what got Julia interested.

Susan Bernstein (SB): Julia learned about the Frito-Lay Dreamvention contest by watching "Ellen" on YouTube. She thought it would be cool to enter her Storm Sleeper invention in the contest. Having just turned 10 in the spring of 2017, she took her own initiative and entered the inaugural nationwide Dreamvention contest by submitting a detailed drawing and description of her Storm Sleeper using the software on the contest's website.

We received a phone call from Frito-Lay in June informing us that Julia's Storm Sleeper was in the running as a potential top five finalist in the Dreamvention contest, and that there were more interview questions for her to answer. It was an exciting time, and we knew there were probably hundreds of other entries that Frito-Lay was considering. We (Julia's parents) got the call in mid-July that Julia

was a top five finalist! We had to keep it a secret from everyone, including Julia. It was difficult to keep this secret! Over Labor Day weekend, Frito-Lay flew us and the other four finalists to Austin to film a surprise reveal to promote the contest. It felt like Willie Wonka! It was an incredible and surreal experience and day, complete with filming and interviews in a huge production shoot.

The contest itself was fun and challenging. We spent every waking minute of 35 days asking friends, family and our community to vote online for Julia's Storm Sleeper. Julia had TV, radio and newspaper interviews as well as some public speaking events. She was so poised and made them look effortless, especially for a 10-year-old. We found out there were 13,000 entries in the contest.

EGT: Was the Storm Sleeper something Julia had envisioned before she heard about the contest?

SB: Yes. Julia created the Storm Sleeper for her invention fair at school last year. Even though she was not chosen in the top 10 out of 32 at her school to advance in a local invention competition, she believed in her invention, persevered and submitted it to the nationwide Dreamvention contest. For her school project, we bought her big bulky pillows, and we didn't provide her with the supplies she truly needed to create her prototype of her Storm Sleeper.

Julia was scared of storms since she was very little. She used to put pillows around her head whenever there was a loud thunderstorm. She would also cover her head with her blanket to keep out the scary sights of the lightning. This is how she came up with the idea to invent the Storm Sleeper. She wanted to help others like her. She then realized the Storm Sleeper could help those who were sensitive to sensory issues, or just wanted a quiet place to relax, unwind or dream up other inventions.

Julia Luetje's Storm Sleeper was not chosen in the top 10 out of 32 at her school to advance in a local invention competition, but she believed in her invention.

EGT: How does the Storm Sleeper work?

SB: It is a pillow fort for your head with Bluetooth speakers and a blanket cover. It creates a safe space that blocks the sights and sounds of loud and scary noises such as thunderstorms, snoring and noisy siblings. It can also be used as a therapy aid for those who are sensitive to sensory issues. We anticipate that it can be used for pets, too.

EGT: What exactly is it made of? What are its special features?

SB: It is made of sound-reducing foam covered with soft fabric and a comfy blanket cover. It has Bluetooth speakers on the inside as well as a pocket for an iPad, phone or book, and a detachable reading light. It is light and portable. The blanket is customizable. The light and pocket enable the user to read and store books and magazines inside of the Storm Sleeper, all while blocking outside noises and light.

EGT: Who created the initial prototype?

SB: Julia created the initial prototype as a school project. It was comprised of big, bulky pillows that were hot-glued together. It also had K.C. Royals printed fabric on top (Julia's favorite baseball team), connected by hook-and-loop fasteners. A Bluetooth speaker was attached to a pillow with hook and loop. The international design firm "MAKO Design + Invent" made the next prototype in the Dreamvention contest based on Julia's drawings and description. This prototype really brought Julia's invention to life!

EGT: How was the prototype different before and after MAKO worked with it?

SB: MAKO was able to build the next prototype using Julia's design specs. They were able to incorporate her vision and bring it to life using the fabrics



and materials she had always envisioned. This prototype was sleeker, smaller and more aesthetically appealing than her original. It was closer to what she initially envisioned. In her school project, we bought her bulky pillows and cheap materials. MAKO used foam covered by fabric instead of the bulky pillows we provided for her school project. We learned a valuable lesson that it is important to take your kids' visions seriously, even if for a school project!

EGT: Has Julia ever invented anything before the Storm Sleeper?

SB: She invents lots of different types of slime! She has always been very much into arts and crafts. She has always been intrigued by how things work, and she continues to find solutions to everyday problems. She frequently tells us her problem-solving ideas for future inventions. We listen more carefully now!

EGT: Did Julia encounter any obstacles in developing the Storm Sleeper?

SB: Julia did not know how to sew, so she used a hot-glue gun on her initial prototype. I think the bulkiness of the original pillows we supplied to her was a hindrance to her conveying the utility of her invention in the original prototype.

EGT: Does Julia have any plans to create a business with the Storm Sleeper? Does she have any other product ideas?

Julia Luetje (center) with her parents Chucker Luetje and Susan Bernstein at the Frito-Lay Dreamvention finalist announcement in Austin, Texas.

SB: Yes! We are currently in the process of developing a business plan. We have been meeting with manufacturers and hope to market the Storm Sleeper by the end of the year. Julia has filed a trademark application and has a patent pending. Julia is always finding solutions for everyday problems. After we go through the process of manufacturing and marketing the Storm Sleeper, we will look into developing her other product ideas.

EGT: What was Julia's and your family's reaction when you were notified that she was a grand-prize winner?

SB: Julia was very surprised! She was at school when we told her, and she immediately told us she had to get back to class to finish her schoolwork. When she came home later that day we had a little party at home, and she was very excited. I was emotional when we received the call; I cried upon hearing the news and couldn't speak. We then surprised Julia with a victory party at our local Dave & Buster's. They were so supportive and thrilled for Julia that they hosted it for us and for Julia's supporters.

EGT: What are Julia's plans for the \$250,000 grand prize?

SB: Julia plans to donate some of the money to her favorite charities that help kids and animals, and she intends to save the rest for college. As parents, we are very relieved to hear that she wants to help others and save the prize money for her college tuition!

EGT: Tell us about the family inventor legacy with the Happy Meal.

SB: Julia's grandfather, Bob Bernstein, invented the Happy Meal for McDonald's in 1977. He is the founder of Bernstein-Rein Advertising and Beauty Brands. He was asked by McDonald's to create something that would better families and kids' experiences at McDonald's. He invented the Happy Meal after noticing that his son (Julia's uncle) repeatedly read over the cereal box at the breakfast table every morning. He also invented and owns the patents for various premiums including the Sippy Dippy Straw and the Happy Cup. Invention is in her blood.

EGT: Any advice for other kid inventors?

SB: Julia says: "Just keep swimming!" This is her "Finding Nemo" reference for never giving up! We admire her confidence and belief in her invention to submit it as an entry in the Dreamvention contest, especially after she wasn't chosen in her school's invention fair. We also think it shows that it is possible to make a difference in the world and create something new and useful, even if you are only 10 years old. 🐬

Books by **Edie Tolchin** (egt@edietolchin.com) include "Fanny on Fire" (fannyonfire.com) and "Secrets of Successful Inventing." She has written for *Inventors Digest* since 2000. Edie has owned EGT Global Trading since 1997, assisting inventors with product safety issues and China manufacturing.



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