

## Local inventors hope creativity pays off

*Personal predicaments give birth to various gizmos and gadgets*



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The idea for the Kick Butt Ball came to Verna Gillis like fruit falling from a tree.

She had plumbed the depths of her mind trying to figure out how to de-stress.

She loves one-liners and word play, and she kept coming back to the motivational phrase "kicking butt."

What about stamping the phrase on a stress ball?

What if the stress ball was actually shaped like a butt? Bingo. The Kick Butt

Ball was born.

The anatomically inspired stress ball helps Gillis relax. Gripping the squishy toy tushie gets her giggling.

"It was something to help me be better," she said.

Her hope, in turning the idea into a product, was that other people would buy it, chill out and get a laugh, too.

Many inventions come from the search for answers to personal quandaries, said Eric Maldonado of Montgomery, who dreamed up his own invention by solving a personal pet peeve.

His brainchild? A super-low-cut undershirt called the Nu-V.

Ed Hebel of Woodbury followed a similar path to creation.

He was thinking of ways to accessorize his Mini Cooper, and came across E-ZPass holders online.

They didn't suit his style, so he made his own with a 3D printer.

Here are the stories of how, with a bit of ingenuity, money and drive, a handful of the region's newest, quirkiest inventions were born:

### The Kick Butt Ball

KERHONKSON — Verna Gillis calls herself the imaginator – a font of ideas, some of which actually make it into reality.

She conceived of the Kick Butt Ball a little more than two years ago. Gillis, a world music producer, wanted it first for herself.

Then, she thought people grappling with anger management would get an emotional release, and possibly a chuckle, by squeezing the stress ball's purple foam cheeks.

It took less than a year to transform her offbeat idea into a salable product. Gillis found a manufacturer in China who sent her several prototypes of the handheld heinie before doing a full production run.

She tested the samples for quality and density. She also made sure the butt was unrealistically round and bulbous.

"I wanted it to be something to make people laugh," she said.

In December 2011, an 18-wheel tractor-trailer delivered 10,000 Kick Butt Balls to her home, at the end of a winding, narrow dirt road far off the beaten path in Kerhonkson.

The truck driver took two and a half hours to back out, Gillis said.

She has sold 5,000 of the balls for \$5 to \$7 at local stores and online. She invested \$50,000 developing the product.

Boxes of the balls sit in Gillis' barns, waiting to be grabbed by the next person with a few dollars to spend and some steam to blow off.

She and her life partner, trombonist Roswell Rudd, composed a catchy jingle to boost sales.

For now, the imaginator has focused her attention on other ideas, including a vintage fashion line and a one-woman show.