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Invention will locate pets in fires

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"SEE A NEED and fill it" is a fitting motto for any inventor.

Gail Eicken of Tinton Falls did just that, with major input from her husband, Gary, who served 30 years in the Coast Guard and 25 years as a Belmar firefighter.

"Gary would come home with so many tragic stories of pets dying in fires because his fellow firefighters from the Goodwill Hose Company didn't know where to find the pets. I wanted to find a way to do something to save more animals," said Gail, an EMT on the first aid squad in Belmar.

But it took 17 years before she filled the need. Her practical solution, the Pet Fire Alert Collar, connects to any home smoke alarm and emits a simultaneous light and noise during a fire to lead firefighters to trapped pets.

Last year, Gail submitted her invention to "Idea Fetch," a national competition to find unique safety products, sponsored by PetSafe and PetCo. Winners were announced at the recent American Pet Product Manufacturers Association Global Pet Expo in San Diego. With more than 5,000 patent ideas in contention, when Eicken's invention captured second place and a check for \$5,000, "I was stunned and thrilled beyond belief," she said.

Reflecting on her original motivation for the invention, she said their 16-year-old cat, B.J., automatically hides when someone enters the house. "Most pets tend to hide and go silent during a fire."

Lost in the dark

They recognizing that the collar had to be sensitive to fire and smoke but not over-reactive. "We didn't want burnt toast to trigger the collar," said Gary, which is why there is a brief delay before the collar's light and noise are emitted. He doesn't think much of window stickers alerting that a pet is inside. "You don't have time to look at a sticker when a fire is raging. Without lights, you wouldn't know if there is a sticker. ... In the midst of a fire, it's like standing in a dark closet at 2 a.m. You can't see a thing," said the seasoned firefighter.

The Eickens envision that fire departments will incorporate Pet Fire Alert Collars into their data systems. "They already do it for people with special needs," said Gary, now retired. A built-in safety measure prevents a pet from resetting the device. "Only a human can reset it, nor can a pet accidentally disconnect it," he said.

Collaring the market

Here's how the invention works in Gail's words: "When the home smoke detector goes off, within seconds it signals the collar on the animal. Then the collar emits a bright light and noise to signal where the pet is located." Once the animal is rescued, only a human can turn off the unit by pushing a button on the collar.

PetSafe is refining modifications before going into full production for release next spring. PetSafe is a leader in the development and production of safety products, including electronic fencing, feeders, bark control systems and pet doors. In addition to PetCo, other major pet product retail chains will carry the Pet Fire Alert Collar. PetSafe anticipates the collar should retail for about \$69. "They're trying to make it as easy as possible so that people will actually buy them," said Gail whose name is listed first on the patent.

Exposure

"We were flown to PetSafe headquarters in Knoxville to meet and talk with the vice president of marketing, Gail recalled. "I showed him my drawings and we were treated very well. They said they'd try to get us on some shows and in some newspapers and magazines." Well, they succeeded. The Eickens appeared last weekend on CNN and Fox News. Interviews have also been set for Cat Fancy and Fire and Rescue magazines.

Will this make them rich? Probably not, since PetSafe retains patent rights. "That's not the point," Gail said. "We want fire people to be educated on our collar so that they'll be aware of this safety measure for pets." She revealed tentative plans for the \$5,000 award. "We're going to buy food for Popcorn Zoo in Tinton Falls," she said, adding a chuckle, "We might go to Vegas to see if we can double some of the winnings."

"The collar is no gimmick," Gary said. "It will definitely save pet lives." Gail summed up her expectations: "If the collar saves even one animal in a fire, it's done its job."

Another contest: Old Navy is seeking a new dog to advertise its products. The nearest -- and last -- casting call is May 25 in Union Square, Manhattan. Contest ends May 29. For details: www.oldnavy.com/magic.

Next week: Pet book recommendations to entertain and educate.

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