UW-Stout students design parachute jacket

By Joe Knight
Leader-Telegram staff

It wasn't superheroes like Spiderman or Batman but the Sept. 11 attack on the World Trade Center towers that inspired three UW-Stout students to design a flying jacket.

"We really got our inspiration from the atrocities of Sept. 11," said Brooke Burch, one of the students who developed a prototype for the jacket, named the Flyer High Rise Escape Garment. "We wanted to develop a product that would aid in exiting a burning building when there was no other way to escape."

The jacket features an internal harness, "flying squirrel wings" stretching from the sleeves to the side and a small parachute that deploys from the back via a ripcord.

A prototype of the flyer jacket placed third among more than 70 entries from around the U.S. at the Safety and Technical Products Student Design Challenge this fall in Florida, which was sponsored by the Industrial Fabrics Association International trade association. The students recently were contacted by a company that expressed an interest in testing their product.
The flyer jacket is only a prototype, Burch said. Nobody has ever jumped off of a building wearing one, and considerable testing would have to be conducted before the jackets could be sold, she said.

"Testing is the hardest part of the process," she said. "Most of the people in the class don't have the time or the resources to get their products tested by the right people."

The students who designed the jacket — Burch, of Rochester, Minn., Jessica Bjorgum of White Bear Lake, Minn., and Kurt Anderson of Waunakee — created it as part of their "Functional Clothing Design" class. All three students are apparel design and development majors.

Students who take the course class conceive and design prototypes for "functional" clothing. The projects have ranged from military clothing designed to conceal the wearer and provide protection from projectiles to clothing for those with cerebral palsy, said Gindy Neidermyer, who teaches the class.

Most students will end up in jobs that involve making clothes designed to look nice rather providing function, although several graduates have gone on to work for Cabela's and outdoor clothing designers, Niedermyer said. But taking a functional-clothing class helps students design better products, even if the main consideration is fashion or appearance, she said.

"It changes the way they design everything. It brings the body more into the design process than just aesthetic design would," she said.

Neidermyer said being contacted by an interested company is a potential first step toward selling the jackets, but testing the product may take years. Pursuing a patent also can be a lengthy process, she said.

However, taking third place in a competition and having an inquiry from an interested company are good first steps, Niedermyer said.

"It's obviously a great start to a product that could come to fruition," she said.

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