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Posted: 5:22 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 16, 2013

South Florida inventors strut their stuff at third annual expo



Gary Coronado

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By Toni-Ann Miller

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WEST PALM BEACH —Zach Marks is not trying to be the next Mark Zuckerberg, although some have begun labeling him as such. The 12-year-old wants to be the next Zach Marks — a boy who, after being told he couldn't have a Facebook page, set out to create his own social networking site with a more kid-friendly feel.

Zach, with the help of his five siblings and parents, created Grom Social in July 2011. They launched the free website four months later, and when about 47,000 visited the site, it crashed nearly 10 times, Zach said. It took about 12 months for the site to be rebuilt, and since its relaunch in November, Grom Social has had 16,400 people sign up from 132 countries.

"Kids love it, and they keep signing up every day," Marks said. "It's been a crazy ride."

Zach Marks was among the inventors and speakers who were in attendance for Resource 2013, the third annual expo put on by the Inventors Society of South Florida. The event, from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Palm Beach County Convention Center, featured about 75 inventors from South Florida and six speakers who have had success with their inventions — including Marks.

Marks' company, whose headquarters is in Boca Raton, recently signed a multimillion-dollar deal with a New York-based IT firm, which helps handle the technical support necessary to provide the 24-hour live monitoring Grom Social boasts. The family is in talks for merchandising and reality television opportunities

The idea came about when, as an 11-year-old, Zach created a Facebook page. A family friend alerted his father that Zach was being exposed to some inappropriate content, so his father, Darren Marks, who had never had a Facebook page, checked it out. He shut down Zach's account. A week later, Zach said he created another with a fake name. He befriended the same people, and was caught by the same family friend, who again told his dad. The two had a heated discussion, Zach told his father there was no safe social networking site for children and then set out to create Grom Social. The website defines a "grom" as "a promising young individual who is quick to learn."

Joining the Marks family at the expo were several other innovative products. A baby towel designed so parents won't need to move around while giving their little ones a bath, a tricycle that carries you places while providing a full-body workout, a toilet seat with an attachment to lift it up and down and even a machine that dehumidifies the air and produces potable water.

Jeff Szur, the founder of Fort Lauderdale-area-based Drinkable Air Technologies, said the water cooler could save a company that uses three 5-gallon water bottles a week more than \$1,000 a year. The coolers run for about \$2,500 for an indoor model and \$2,995 for a stainless steel version that can go indoors or out.

Unlike the youth social media site concept, Iris and Martin Onrot of Boynton Beach had a product on display that is geared toward the large elderly population of South Florida.

The couple began selling in 2009 ComfiHips, a set of hip protector pads for those vulnerable to falls and injured hips. The pads are inserted into underwear that have pockets on both sides, which the Onrots say has been proven to prevent hip injuries. They say severe injuries at a long-term care facility in 2009-10 decreased from 22 the previous year to five. Hip fractures, they say went down from 14 to two.

Leo Mazur, the president of the inventors society, said he was impressed with the turnout for the expo. There were return showcasers but there were also many first-timers, which Mazur said he enjoyed since the expo provided a free, friendly environment to get their feet wet and prepare them for what lies ahead.

"We show the inventors the resources available to them so they can become the resources (the) industry needs," Mazur said.



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