CHEERING ON THE INGENUITY OF TODAY'S AND TOMORROW'S INNOVATORS

By Kirsten A. Conover | MARCH 12, 1996

This year's Lemelson-MIT Prize-winner and Student Prize-winner will be announced April 11 and May 1, respectively.

Student inventors, in particular, represent an untapped resource of creative and entrepreneurial energy, according to benefactor Jerome Lemelson, who is responsible for the touch-controlled cassette-tape drive (found in the Sony Walkman, for example) and computer-read bar codes, among various other inventions.

The Lemelson-MIT program is divided into three categories: Lifetime Achievement award (William Hewlett and David Packard, founders of computermaker Hewlett-Packard, won in 1995), the Lemelson-MIT Prize for a US inventor (winner receives $500,000), and Lemelson-MIT Student Prize for an innovative student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology ($30,000).

This year's student-prize candidates, many of them graduate students, include:

Shiva Ayyadurai, founder of Millennium Productions, and inventor of the White House Encryption System. When President Clinton needed a reliable encryption system for his electronic mail, he turned to Mr. Ayyadurai, whose classification system beat those of industry leaders.

Now he is hosting a virtual-reality art show titled "Crossing Lines": billed as the first international internet multimedia arts exhibit on racism and discrimination - with the goal of bringing art and technology together. (Its Internet address is: http://www.arts-online.com/ crossinglines.html). He and his staff also design home pages for arts organizations such as the Alvin Ailey Dance Company and the Handel & Haydn Society.

Gregg Duthaler, who is working on a way to make walls invisible to an infrared remote-controlled sensor. His research includes a wide variety of "fun" projects as well, from a pendulum-stiffened speaker stand to an ink-jet printer that spurts droplets of molten solder the diameter of a human hair.

Berit Ahmad, who is researching ways to reduce the amount of waste created during chemical processes - rather than finding better ways to treat waste once it is produced.

Thad Starner, who invented "Wearables," futuristic minicomputers that can be worn, complete with a miniature display that sits in front of your eye, a one-handed keyboard and mouse, a hard drive, and a modem. His Photobook Face Recognition System attaches names to images of people's faces, so the next time a familiar smile appears on the monitor, the name appears with it.

In conjunction with the Lemelson-MIT awards, the "Invention Dimension," a new World Wide Web resource for K-12 students, is furthering the push to get young people interested in invention.

At the site, students, teachers, and parents can learn about inventors, past and present, and find links to other sites that offer a window on inventive endeavors and the people who undertake them. The "Invention Dimension's" Internet address is: http://web.mit.edu/invent/