

Women Inventors

Part 5: Patsy Sherman

By SUSAN CASEY

“Anybody can be an inventor. It has absolutely nothing to do with how much education or how many degrees you have after your name. It’s a mind-set,” says Patsy Sherman, who with partner Sam Smith invented the fabric protector Scotchgard. “When an inventor sees something unusual or something that is a disappointing result, they don’t just throw it out and start over. They say, ‘Hey, what happened here? Why did it happen? What does it mean? What might it be good for?’ ”

And that’s just what she and Smith did. It was in the early 1950s while working at the 3M Co. They were trying to create a latex or rubber material for the fuel lines of the then-new jet engines that would not be disintegrated by the fuels required by these engines. Accidentally, some of the material spilled onto the tennis shoe of one of the technicians. When it dried, Sherman and others tried to remove it with soapy water and organic solvents. Nothing would even wet the spill. “No one had ever thought of a fabric that could repel both oil and water. And the spot was cleaner than the rest of the shoe. We thought, ‘Forget those aircraft hoses! Maybe there’s something bigger here.’ ” She and Smith went on to create the fabric protector that became used worldwide.

Though Sherman was initially hired



at 3M on a temporary basis, her discovery extended her job for the next 40 years until she retired in 1992. “The important thing to remember,” she said, “is that many of the world’s greatest discoveries like penicillin and the vulcanization of rubber came about strictly by accident, but somebody was keeping their eyes open and their brain in gear. I tell girls: We’ve got a secret weapon called women’s intuition. It’s surprising how often it works out.” In 2001, Sherman was the

sixth woman inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame.

Kids, March is Women’s History Month. This year’s theme is “Women Sustaining the American Spirit.” For more information, visit www.nwhp.org/whm/themes/themes.html.

Susan Casey is author of “Women Invent! Two Centuries of Discoveries That Have Shaped Our World,” from Chicago Review Press. This story will be on The Times’ Web site at www.latimes.com/kids.

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