

A fine display of innovation

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Great research doesn't always occur at the great universities. Indeed, a pile of university degrees doesn't guarantee that the person who holds them is more of a genius than the person who doesn't.

Bill Gates, for example, didn't stick around Harvard long enough to pick up his degree, but his status as a university dropout didn't hold him back.

Another fine example of ingenuity has just been displayed by a high school student in Waterloo. **Daniel Burd**, a 16-year-old Grade 11 student at Waterloo Collegiate Institute, has come up with what is a brilliant concept that might help the world deal with a serious environmental problem: plastic.

Plastic has many assets but the problem with it is that it won't go away when you want it to go away. It may take up to 1,000 years to decompose.

Burd came up with the idea of using bacteria to attack plastic bags and he set out to find the best bacteria and conditions to accomplish this goal. He was able to degrade 43 per cent of some plastic within six weeks. That is, to put it mildly, considerably less time than 1,000 years.

The young student's accomplishment has not gone unnoticed. He won the top prize at the Canada-Wide Science Fair in Ottawa. This prize is prestigious as well as tangible. He received \$10,000 as well as a \$20,000 scholarship.

The interesting point about **Burd's** research is that he started with information that is available to anyone and everyone. Is it not common knowledge that plastic takes a long time to decompose? Is it not also common knowledge that plastic does, eventually, decompose, even if it takes 1,000 years?

What **Burd** did was take this information, think about it, and then ask questions about it.

Isn't this an example of the world working at its best? Is there any better basis for learning than asking that very fundamental question: Why?

What **Burd** has done should serve as a model not only for his own thinking in future but for other people, particularly high school students. The ability of the human mind to grasp and solve technological problems seems virtually limitless, as opposed to the ability of humans to solve a problem related to what might be called human relations: living together peacefully. We humans have shown that we are capable of creating wheels, ships, rockets, spaceships, telephones, radios, televisions, computers, the BlackBerry,

and the list could go on and on. They all required creative thinking.

The residents of Waterloo Region will want to wish **Daniel Burd** well as he continues his research and his education. Regardless of whether his ideas about plastic bags turn out to have commercial application, he has shown the type of thinking that will eventually solve this problem.

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