

Two exhibitors at the Royal tell their story



By Constance Scrafield

What do you do when you are still idealistic enough to want to change the world? You do your Masters Degree in Engineering Entrepreneurship and Innovation, following your HBS in Mechanical Engineering, as did Melissa Houghton, CEO and Founder of Lumago Inc., a CEO under 29.

And what do you do when you have been professional sales person in Poland and Russia all your working life, then immigrate to Canada where a few enterprises have not panned out as hoped? You decide to work with your friends and colleagues in Poland to import the best possible product for which there is a definitive need in your new Canadian marketplace. After six years in Toronto and now, growing her business for the last year and a half, this is Lara Michalewska's company, Ecolife Trade.

Every kind of thing that could warm a person's body, made from wool in Poland is on Lara Michalewska's stand here at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair this year. Slippers of multiple sizes and styles ? babies' slippers with faces and cozy designs, so many different types of warmth for feet of full foot to slip-ons are layered around her space. Beautiful whole body woollen baby suits hang from a rack atop of which are hats, mittens, gloves, baby boots. A woollen seat pad for a chair; pants with suspenders, neck warmers made to cover the body just below the neck, jackets with zippered arms and hoods, vests and a great deal more fill the interior of Ms Michalewska's space.

Her wool products are soft, clean, a quality that caresses and soothes. After her attempts with different products that were not successful here, Ms Michalewska said, "I was in contact with people I know well in Poland about the wool items ? I knew they are very high quality and after investigation about importing them and the market need for them here, I decided to start this business.?" Without going back to Poland to purchase her stock, she works with her business colleagues in Poland on Skype to search for a diverse inventory. She sells beautiful protection for cyclists: warm caps with rainproof covers and half sleeves to fit over jackets and gloves, toasty wool inside and rainproof exteriors. Genius.

Speaking of genius, Melissa Houghton's system of Aquaponics is certainly worthy of the appellation. Here is how it works: a fish tank of 20 to 350 gallons, populated by fish, edible or otherwise, sits at the bottom of the construction. Water from the tank is pumped from the tank through pipes wherein plants are grown. Fish waste, while excellent as fertilizer, contains ammonia, which is not good. Therefore, the water passes through a filter of bacteria to clean the water of the harmful ammonia before it travels through the pipes.

The pipes are drilled at regular intervals with holes large enough to hold small plant baskets. In these are plants, kale, basil, lettuce of any kind and so forth. These grow and flourish and are a year round garden of nutrition. In the tank she has on display at the Royal, Ms. Houghton stocks talapia which she and her family also consume. The water concludes its trip back into the tank. From time to time, fresh water is added to the tank as needed.

Above it all, acting as substitute for sunshine, are LED lights, as the assemblage is meant to stay indoors.

The whole design and concept were created by Ms. Houghton with a group of fellow students at MacMaster University where she was doing her Masters. They developed the Aquaponic system as it is during 2015 and, realizing what the value of what they had created, they incorporated in 2016.

With government research funding covering much of the costs, granted to her as a CEO under 29, in addition to the support of her parents and her fiance's parents, Ms Houghton has been able to start to establish the business as a business. She is the sole proprietor of the company now as her fellow students dropped out of the project over time.

?It's hard to go months without any pay,? she commented. ?I have the support of my family and my fiance's family. When the grant came through, that was helpful too.?

She explained further, ?My dad and myself make it in-house. He's a music teacher. So he works his weekends on them. We buy all the material from Home Hardware.?

They have begun to sell and lease the systems to schools, which is the plan.

She said, ?Schools, libraries, community centres ? any educational place. One school has committed to buying two and another is leasing one for a couple of months.?

It is a beginning with only the whole world to conquer.

Entering into any new venture is a leap of faith. Both ladies, Lara Michalewska and Melissa Houghton have done what they could by way of research and study to gaze into the possible future of their endeavours.

Ms. Michalewska is bringing a high quality product of really different and splendid design for tolerating the cold of a Canadian winter. She has been participating in Polish and Ukrainian festivals, as well as events in Cabbagetown, Toronto. She plans to have a stall for the three weeks of Christmas market during December in Nathan Phillips Square at Toronto's City Hall.

And Melissa Houghton is bringing her own thin edge of the wedge to change the world. Her ambition is simply stated: ?I want to be the global leader of Aquaponics in the world.?

Come to the Royal Winter Fair to meet these ladies and so much more. The Royal is on until Sunday, November 13.