

BIRMINGHAM-BLOOMFIELD

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**SPOTLIGHT:
BIRMINGHAM**

Head 'Into the Woods' on Friday

"Into the Woods," the Tony Award-winning musical by Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine, will open Friday at the Village Players Playhouse in Birmingham.

This production features Dan Harley of Waterford and Rita Montpetit Liegl of Beverly Hills as the Baker and his wife, who encounter fairy-tale characters such as Little Red Riding Hood, Jack and the Beanstalk and Cinderella.

Shows will run 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through April 5, with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. March 30 and April 6.

The Village Players Playhouse is at 34660 Woodward in Birmingham. Tickets are \$15 and may be purchased by calling 248-644-2075 or going to www.birminghamvillageplayers.com.

By Nancy Chipman Powers



Photos by ANDRE J. JACKSON/Detroit Free Press

Inventor Tom Westman, 55, stands with his SnowPusherLite on March 6 at his home in Bloomfield Hills. Westman describes the pusher as "more of a snow broom" than a shovel. Westman, who lost his job in the auto-supply industry last spring, completed his invention in July and has sold several hundred of them.

THE BIG PUSH

Bloomfield Hills inventor hopes his snow tool will clear career path

By ALEX P. KELLOGG
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

When Bloomfield Hills resident Tom Westman lost his well-paying job at a Tier 1 auto supplier last spring, he nearly sank into the doldrums.

But Westman has perked himself up by taking on a second, rather novel career: in-

vention.

With his sudden free time, Westman, who has in front of his home a long, circular driveway that he's struggled to shovel for years, got to thinking: What would make that job easier next winter?

He already used a large squeegee attached to a flat piece of wood, which innova-

tion was chalked up by his two daughters to his being a "crazy dad." In the end, he invented a spinoff that makes this job easier, he insists. He calls it a snow pusher.

By giving him hope of staying financially afloat, it is already proving quite useful to Westman, his friends and family say. It reminds them of what has often kept Americans going in tough times — small,

See SNOW, 4

Westman's SnowPusherLite is a thin, curved device that pushes lighter snowfall off flat surfaces. It works much like a squeegee would on water, he says.



SNOW | That white stuff is easier to push than to shovel

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homegrown businesses. Westman's invention, SnowPusherLite, is a thin, shovel-like device that pushes light snowfall off flat surfaces. It works much like a squeegee would on water, he says.

In instances where a snowplow wouldn't work and where a shovel makes tough work of a light job, he seems to be onto something — maybe. And that's a good enough start for him for now, he says.

"Let's face it, shovels have been around forever," says the 55-year-old father of two daughters.

His daily pitch starts this way, then, he gets giddy with enthusiasm, describing the nuances of his product. "This thing doesn't toss snow like a shovel would. It just pushes it out of the way."

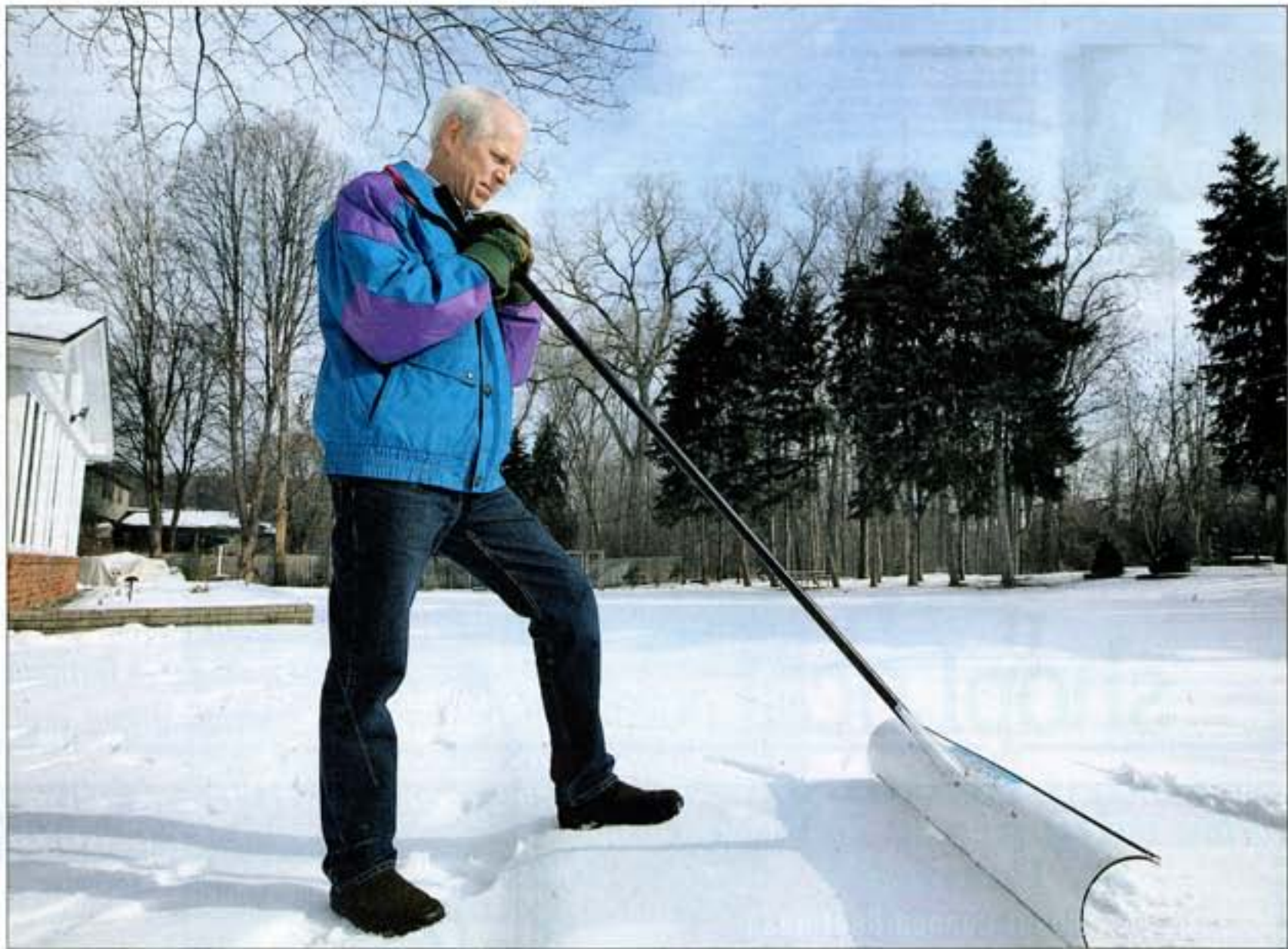
"It's more of a snow broom, for lack of a better way to put it," he concludes.

In late January, Westman's idea received a boost. His creation was featured by reporter Ruth Spencer on WDIV-TV Local 4.

Instantly, he went from selling it to neighbors and friends here and there to moving more than 500 units. He's now shipping SnowPusherLites in four different sizes to other parts of the country on a regular basis and selling it on consignment in a handful of local mom-and-pop stores.

"It's more of an inspiration for him," says his older daughter, Kathryn, 22, a senior at Oakland University living at home.

"Having this brought him



Photos by ANDRE J. JACKSON/Detroit Free Press

When Westman lost his regular job, he started thinking about his long, circular driveway that he had struggled to shovel every winter: What would make that job easier next winter?

back to normalcy," she says. "He's turned his life around."

"I'm all for it," says his wife Deborah, 55, of her husband's endeavor. A webmaster for Lahser High School, she designed her husband's Web site, www.snowpusherlite.com.

But her job alone can't support the family.

Even if her husband's inven-

tion doesn't pan out financially — and she says she's hopeful it will — "there's such a nice sense of accomplishment.... It's a good feeling."

With his six-figure salary gone, Westman's concern for his finances and his family's prospects remains very real.

The Westmans notice the rising cost of higher-end groceries now, they say. Once-regular clothing-shopping trips at Somerset have been nicked for good by his wife, as have overseas vacations they used to take annually.

Westman's snow pusher is up for patent with the U.S. government. It's his best hope for now, he says, to help the family move forward.

While it can't in fact scoop snow easily like a shovel, he admits, and wouldn't work on heavier snows like some of those we've been having recently, his product should draw some interest, he says. Still, a patent could cost him between \$10,000 and \$20,000, a major investment on a gamble.

Priced from \$19.95 to \$39.95, his products cost about the same as most moderately priced shovels, he says. Snow-

PusherLite ranges from 18 to 48 inches in width.

Made from durable plumbing materials (a pipe sawed in half, metal trim, etc.), it's a relatively easy addition to a garage of tools. Plus, while Westman doesn't have a ton of experience in design, he does have experience in moving a product, thanks to his decades with the auto industry.

"It was time for me to get out of working for the other guy," says Westman. "I'm not going to go back and work for half of what I used to make.... Plus, there's nobody hiring."

So he's not waiting on any pie in the sky, he says. He knows his days in the auto industry are over.

The good news is that a handful of customers — like John Frenz, who co-owns his family's hardware store, Frenz & Sons Hardware in Royal Oak — are sold on his product.

"For the smaller, nuisance snows that you really don't want to get the shovel for, it really works well," says the 65-year-old Berkley resident.

Westman stopped by Frenz's store not too long ago

and interested him in selling SnowPusherLite on consignment. Frenz says he's sold more than a dozen in the first two weeks.

He even uses one to clear the sidewalk in front of his own business now, he says.

"For this late in the year, for something to sell that well for snow, it says it's a good idea."

Contact ALEX P. KELLOGG at 248-351-9888 or akellogg@freepress.com.



Westman makes his way around SnowPusherLites stacked in his garage. They sell for \$19.95-\$39.95, depending on the width.

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