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Ideas spring from need to shake things up The Boston Globe

By **Stephen Smith, Globe Staff** | **October 8, 2005**

There was the fire burner, the space bender, and the funkadelic harpist.

The wellspring of innovation, they each showed, flows through different media. But it all begins with a need, whether it's a desire to liberate the artistic soul, unravel the secrets of the universe, or find a way to wear a harp around your neck.

Scientists, musicians, and social provocateurs convened yesterday to celebrate innovation -- and to campaign for its expansion -- during the second day of the IDEAS Boston 2005 conference, organized by The Boston Globe.

Eric von Hippel, who champions innovation at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, told the audience at the Federal Reserve Bank downtown about agriculture advances and nutrition bars that stemmed from the needs of individuals.

"What users are developing now at the leading edge is what manufacturers will want later," said von Hippel, a professor at MIT's Sloan School of Management.

Deborah Henson-Conant is a user of the harp. But she is no clad-in-flowing-silk musician sitting astride a mammoth instrument. Well, she once was.

"Here I am behind this harp, and it's too dang big," Henson-Conant recalled thinking early in her musical pursuits. "I need to explode it."





What she wanted was a harp that was more like an electric guitar, slung around her neck.

"I had a desperate need," she said, "and I had to build it."

Actually, she found a French harp maker to build it, and the result was on display yesterday, as Henson-Conant stomped and murmured and plucked, evoking waves of toe tapping and hand clapping.

The creation of Barnaby Evans evokes deep, almost primal,

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emotion, too. He saw a need to liberate his artistic impulse from the confines of galleries. And he saw a more communal yearning as well, a desire to be freed from the isolation of modernity.

Those needs converged, and WaterFire was born in Providence in 1994, with 100 bonfires suspended a few inches above the three rivers that run through the city.

"People will come to this as a work of romance, a work of mystery, a work of wistfulness," Evans said. "Everyone is in these small niche markets. I wanted to pull people together."

Lisa Randall wants to pull the universe apart. She is a Harvard University physicist who has earned prominence with her explorations of whether space consists of more than three dimensions.

"A lot of people are confused about the work I do," Randall conceded.

Her belief that the world may be constituted of additional dimensions could help explain some of what has remained inexplicable in physics.

Roland G. Fryer Jr. has sought to explain the dimension of race in the United States. A researcher at the National Bureau of Economic Research, Fryer said that the discussion of race has been framed too often by emotion, not fact.

He has sought to root the discussion in fact, using reserves of economic, health, and social data to determine the truth about long-held assumptions.

"My idea here today is embarrassingly simple," Fryer said. "Let's just get beyond the rhetoric and the politics and get to the statistics and the mathematics."

Neil Gershenfeld wants to give people across the world the tools to fulfill their needs -- and unify the digital and physical worlds.

His description of "personal fabrication" -- the notion of people using computers to help build what they lack -- provided a perfect coda for life in the world of innovation.

"It's chaotic, it's confusing," said Gershenfeld, an MIT physicist. "But it's here."

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