

Slim Jims and Side Curtains: Toyota Celebrates 20 Years of Patented North American Innovation

June 15, 2015



Ann Arbor, Mich. (June 15, 2015) — In 1995, breaking into a car wasn't all that complicated. Slide a "slim jim" between the doorframe and the glass, give it a tug and that's all she wrote. Over time, carmakers developed countermeasures to keep would-be bandits at bay. Some worked and some didn't...but they all added cost to the vehicles and complexity to the manufacturing process.

Toyota engineer Norm Kerr, III, had a better idea.

It was a simple, off-the-shelf solution that saved time on the assembly line and realized a significant cost savings. While the implementation of Kerr's idea was short-lived (Side-impact safety regulations resulted in completely re-engineered vehicle doors), the idea itself became symbolic. Not as an advance in anti-theft mechanisms but as the first patent issued to a Toyota Technical Center (TTC) engineer.

Fast forward 20 years and another TTC engineer, Nora Arellano, was awarded a patent for side curtain airbags used in the Toyota Tundra. Her idea, which can protect occupants during several different crash scenarios, resulted in the 1000th patent issued to Toyota's North American Manufacturing and Engineering headquarters.

At a June 11th event, held in the Toyota Engineering Theater at the Michigan Science Center, Toyota North America CEO Jim Lentz recognized the achievements of Kerr, Arellano and 114 other Toyota engineers and researchers who earned patents during the previous fiscal year.

“These patents represent your brainpower, your innovation, your diligence, your hard work and your passion,” Lentz said. “Patents were essential in creating Toyota in 1937 and are equally important today in protecting the innovative products and processes you invent to make our customers’ experience the best in the business.”

Five Toyota Technical Center engineers have over 20 patents to their name, including Mindy Zhang who has been awarded 29 patents, the most of any Toyota North American team member.

After his initial patent, slim-jim-thwarting Kerr has been awarded several others, including two this year. As for Arellano, she has seven other patents and was recently named one of *Corp! Magazine*’s “Michigan’s Most Valuable Millenials.”

Toyota’s North American engineers and researchers and their efforts have resulted in Toyota Motor Engineering & Manufacturing, North America, Inc (TEMA) being the third largest patent-holding company in Michigan.