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Deborah Darnell's ingenious invention has ignited a new and unexpected career.

LIGHT MY FIRE

BY ANN TAYLOR

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTINA TANNERY

SOCIAL LIGHT PHOTOGRAPHED AT ELIZABETH D. KENNEDY'S CATERING, CAKES BY TARTINE



It started with her appreciation of beauty and now is a thriving business for Deborah Darnell. The Social Light is an elegant alternative to a regular lighter. You can choose from an assortment of designs, styles and colors, one for each type of table setting or occasion.

Picture the scene: an elegant dinner party for 12. The table is set with the very finest linen, china and crystal; candles encircle a floral centerpiece and the champagne is chilling in a silver bucket. All that's needed to make it complete is to dim the chandelier and light the candles.

The hostess opens a drawer, shuffles through its contents and pulls out a long red plastic lighter. No, no, not the Bic used to light the outdoor grill! The very thought has Deborah Darnell groaning in mock horror. For someone who appreciates beauty, that just would not do.

"I was seeing women on television in these wonderful settings who were lighting candles with these flame throwers. Then they'd quickly put them out of sight," says Deborah. "If you have this lovely table arrangement, who wants to pull out something that looks like a power tool or a gun? It really destroys the atmosphere.

"So that's when I started asking myself the question, why do we light candles? They play an important role in religious ceremonies, at social functions, anytime there is a special occasion—for instance, the lighting of a unity candle during a wedding.

"It's really women who are keepers of the flame. It may have been a man who discovered fire, but women are usually the ones stok-



Deborah Darnell's background in graphic design and her appreciation for beauty led her to create the Social Light.



Rather than whisking it out of sight after the candles are lit, the Social Light provides an elegant counterpoint to any graceful table arrangement.

ing the hearth. When we light candles in the home we're creating a romantic fantasy."

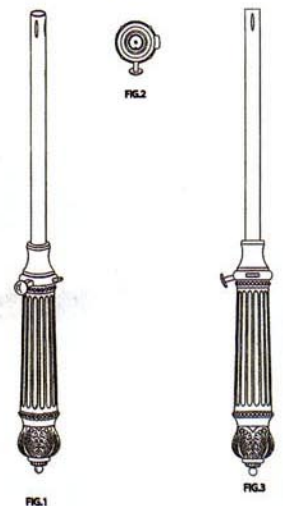
That's the thought that prompted Deborah, a graphic designer, to come up with a product more in sync with the setting. After doing extensive market research she began developing several prototypes that led to the creation of the Social Light.

With its elegantly sculpted handle and long graceful wand, the Social Light enhances the atmosphere, becoming an elegant choice for home lighting needs, whether it's candles, the fireplace or even the outdoor grill. Every detail has been thought of, from the solid metal construction to the child-resistant mechanism to a hand-adjustable flame control under the finial.

"I have a degree in fine art with a major in sculpture so I've always been three dimensionally inclined," says Deborah, explaining how her past experiences have brought her to where she is today, an inventor and successful businesswoman.

"I did post-graduate work at the Rhode Island School of Design, where I met my husband Michael (Michael Wein, M.D., who specializes in allergies and asthma). I followed him around all through his residency. We went to Nashville where I became the senior art director of Biomedical Communications at Vanderbilt. Then we moved to Baltimore, where Michael was on a

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Deborah Darnell's patented Social Light.



After extensive market research, Deborah Darnell realized that there was a niche for the Social Light. High-end catalogs like Frontgate are happy to include her product in their pages.

fellowship doing research at Johns Hopkins. There I was the marketing art director at Sinai Hospital. One day I finally said, all right, Michael, you need to get out of research and get a full-time job!"

Her husband took her words to heart and before she knew it she was packing up in preparation for their trip to Vero Beach, where he had an interview at the Doctor's Clinic.

"It was in the middle of a snowstorm, my son Matt was 16 months old and my daughter Samantha was a newborn. You have to understand, I grew up in Miami, and when we got here it was the first time my bones had been warm in 10 years." Deborah closes her eyes, smiling as she recalls that moment of bliss. "There I was, sitting out on the balcony at the Doubletree in the middle of winter. The sun was shining, it was 70 degrees and life was wonderful."

What wasn't so wonderful was the fact that, after holding responsible and challenging positions, the move would leave her unem-

ployed.

"I thought oh, my gosh, what am I going to do? I'd had all these wonderful jobs, but now what? Luckily, I found a job working part-time at Redgate Communications (a division of America Online), then fell into this candle company, which was small at the time, working as an independent agent and doing package design for them."

The candle company, which grew rapidly, just happened to be a major supplier to Wal-Mart. "I ended up flying to Bentonville, Arkansas, where I learned all about Wal-Mart. As an artist I picked up a lot of knowledge about products and packaging. That's when I began to realize there was nothing like this out there." Deborah reaches for a long green box with a see-through panel framing a silver Social Light.

"I had also traveled to the candle company's factory in China and that's when the nub of an idea started brewing. It was 2002 and, as I looked around Hong Kong, I thought to myself, this was where I'd really like to get started; this is where the action is."



The Chinese New Year allowed Deborah and her Chinese teacher Chen Giang Li to welcome in "The Year of the Dog."



The case of the Social Light is first molded and then plated before the exterior case is applied.

Deborah didn't waste time. Assigning herself the dual tasks of designer and engineer, she commandeered the family's cabana/guest house, turning it into a studio workshop. There, above a long counter where she spreads notes and taps away on her laptop, shelves are lined with books covering various aspects of design, architecture and history. Tucked among them are computer software programs; all come together to feed her creative mind.

A treasured, well-worn table Deborah found in the basement of their Baltimore house, left there by the previous owners, serves as the perfect surface for products-in-progress. To date, she's developed a variety of handle designs and finishes for the Social Light. There are the feminine, masculine and sophisticated looks, along with various finishes such as copper and nickel, antique

bronze, leather and "shabby chic." This is a serious work space and Theo, the family poodle, clearly grasps the concept. He can most often be found snoozing quietly by Deborah's feet as she works.

When I decided to develop the light I went to trade shows, did a lot of research, and discovered that 96 percent of candle consumers are women," Deborah says. "I also found out that no other company in the world was making anything like what I had in mind. My family told me I had to give it a name so people could say, 'Hand me the whatever.' That's when I asked myself, Okay, when will it be used? The answer: at social events. I also asked myself, who's going to use it? Women.

"That's when I hit on the name Social Light, which is a double play on words. From that point on I knew I had something and that I needed to get it out on the market.

"This whole thing has been a big investment for me. I received the patent in 2004 but before the lighter could be sold in stores it needed to go through child-proof testing, so I had to hire a testing company.

"Around 200 children were tested in small groups of about 10 each in separate rooms. They were approximately 3 years old and several of them referred to it as a Harry Potter lighter. The testing process was quite rigorous; you're only allowed to have so many ignitions. I was keeping my fingers crossed the entire time."

As she thinks back at how far she and the Social Light have come,

Deborah is amazed at the way some things simply fell into place. "All of the manufacturing is done in Wenzhou, China, halfway between Canton and Shanghai. The first time I went to China was with the candle company, and I have to admit it was scary. When you're there alone it's extremely lonely; there are some people who speak English, but not terribly well. You go into shops and nobody

speaks English. I could yell Fire! or Help! and no one would come. With the Social Light I figured I'd probably go there two to four times a year, so I knew I needed to be able to speak enough Chinese to make myself understood. But where do you learn the language when you're living in Vero Beach?"

As Deborah soon discovered, right in her own back-



The manufacturer of the Social Light is in China which means Deborah travels to that country several times a year. Thanks to the Chinese language program at Saint Edward's Upper School, she is learning Chinese in order to more easily communicate with her business partners.

Learning Chinese at Saint Edward's School

The Chinese program at Saint Edward's Upper School is one of 29 such programs in the U.S., with only three of them in the Southeast. The program began at Saint Edward's in 2002 as a student-driven club with approximately 20 participants. Funded by parents, it has been a part of the school's curriculum ever since, with interest growing as more and more students elect to study the language.

"We now offer Chinese I, II, III and IV," says Kim Peckham, the school's director of marketing, who was instrumental in making the program a reality. After a grant request to the Freedom Foundation was turned down, she contacted one of the organizations it funded, the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations.

"I saw that they had a teacher-exchange program, which we applied for. They were interested so they came and interviewed us. Then they went to China and interviewed teachers there. We are now on our third exchange teacher and they've all been wonderful. We've also hired a native Taiwanese to teach part-time.

"The program has been very successful. In fact, my son spent his junior year in Beijing with School Year Abroad and is planning to continue his Chinese-Asian studies next fall at Brown University. Another young man spent a summer in Beijing with the Princeton University Chinese Immersion Program and is now studying Chinese at Yale. I'd say the program has already made a major difference in the life of our school and our students."

yard. For the past three and a half years St. Edward's Upper School has been offering classes in Chinese (see sidebar on page 174). Deborah was granted permission to join a class in Chinese I, yet she admits that at first glance she was concerned it might be too difficult for her to tackle.

"That's when I said to myself, I can do this. Even if I speak it like a child—well, even 2 and 3 year olds can make themselves understood. So I started going to classes in September, sitting in with the kids, and I went to China in October. Even after only three weeks of classes I could be in an elevator and follow the conversation. I knew what was going on and when I was in an office I could pick up on, if they were talking about a German or French client. I could even read lines in some of the ads. It was very exciting."

Deborah's eyes light up as she recalls the breakthrough. She continues to have breakthroughs, not only in her ability to understand and speak Chinese, but with new designs for her invention.

Until last fall the Social Light logo featured a sketch of a sophisticated-looking woman lighting a candle. But after reading an article in *The New York Times* about Japanese pop artist Takashi Murakami, known for his animal images—he recently redesigned Louis Vuitton handbags—she decided she wanted to create an entirely new look for her product.

"What struck me was when Murakami said that people sometimes have trouble relating to a human figure," she says. She turns to her laptop, clicks on an icon and scrolls until the screen is suddenly filled with the silhouette of a stylized moth. "This is our new logo. It's a play on words—you know, like a moth to a flame."

The Social Light made its official debut two years ago on Mother's Day at the Housewares & Gourmet Show in San Francisco. "It was kind of interesting," Deborah recalls. "We made some sales but people for the most part were skeptical. They would look at the lighter and I could see them thinking, we'll wait and see if it's still around next year. The women got it; the men weren't so sure. But we made a lot of contacts.

"Then the Frontgate catalog people picked us up. They came up to me at a show in Las Vegas and I explained the concept to them. I do a lot of catalog shopping and all along I had thought wouldn't it be great if the Social Light could be featured in Frontgate. And now it is!"

Later, Deborah attended a show in New York City where she signed a contract with Solutions, another cat-

alog firm. The lighter is also available in many small retail shops through the U.S.

Deborah continues to look for ideas that will enhance her product. Last spring at the International Hardware Show in Chicago she not only made a significant sale, she discovered some exquisite silk boxes. Again, serendipity played a role. So did her daughter.

"It was during spring break and there was nowhere else for Samantha to go; my husband was at a conference and my son was on a St. Edward's trip to Montreal, so I decided to bring her with me. I had given her all these instructions—dress right, talk right. There were between 5,000 to 10,000 people and no other children, so she was quite an attraction.

"Our booth was stuck way back in a corner where very few buyers would see us. When a couple of neighboring exhibitors from Japan visited our display the rest of us pretty much ignored them, but not Samantha. She started talking to them and you could tell they were impressed with her presentation. She ended up selling 80 units, which was the Social Light's very first international sale. I was so excited!"

More excitement was to come. "Sam had to go to the bathroom and I introduced her to these two women who were nearby so she could ask for help if she got lost. They were from Thailand and they had these beautiful silk boxes, which are far superior to the ones already being manufactured in China. They're perfect for Social Lights."

More success was about to come her way in October, when the Social Light made headlines by receiving the Best New Product award in the Tabletop Accessories category at the Gourmet & Hardware Show in New York. "A compliment to me is that people are already trying to knock off my lighter," she says. The Social Light has also begun to catch the attention of magazine editors. It was featured in the December 2005 issues of *Fancy Food & Culinary Products Magazine* and *Midwest Living Magazine*. Exciting, yes, but there's more to come.

Deborah's business card states simply "Deborah Darnell—Product Designer." She already has ideas for many other handle designs for her lighter, and new products at various stages of development are beginning to take shape on the studio work table. When completed they, like the Social Light, will be part of a line of elegant must-haves for candle lovers.

"People leave magnifying glasses and letter-openers out on tables all the time," she says, holding one of each, their silver handles gleaming, "so why not candle lighters? I wanted to take them to that level, and I did." ❁