Jennifer Indovina

A local engineering company finds its niche in energy efficiency

She had to blow up a few toasters in the garage to get where she is today. But Jennifer Indovina’s folks were cool about it.

“I liked to take things apart,” says the Irondequoit resident. “I was a complete gadget geek from early on. I had parents who were fine with a little girl who would rather play with Legos.”

When engineering runs in the family, you get an early start. Both of her parents are engineers.

“Both sides of my family are a bunch of nerds,” she says. “I was fortunate to have a whole group of adults surrounding me who were completely OK with having a little nerdy kid running around taking things apart and putting them back together again.”

But her mom and dad—and her grandfather—were interested in more than gadgetry.

“It isn’t about just building electronics,” she says. “My fam-
ily works on projects that are world-
changing. When you have that type
of legacy behind you, you don’t just
want to tinker; you want to make
things that will have an impact.”

You can’t get much bigger than the
energy business, which is where Indov-
ina started making her mark before
she turned 30.

Rochester-born, she moved with her
family to Boynton Beach, Fla., and
lived there for much of her childhood.
The family came back as she was
entering high school, and Indovina
graduated from Bishop Kearney High
School. She went on to Rochester
Institute of Technology, where she
earned an engineering degree in 2007,
as well as an MBA in finance and
marketing in 2008.

“When I graduated, I went to work
for a semiconductor startup in Roch-
ester,” she says. “The company I was
working for basically shipped all the
jobs to China.”

Newly out of work, she and a small
group of colleagues started brain-
storming about starting a company
of their own. They wanted to make
products that would make a difference
in the world.

“I was very passionate about energy,
and energy efficiency looked like a big
market opportunity,” she says.

The group of five started building
prototypes in Indovina’s father’s base-
ment and showed them around to their
industry contacts. Out of that base-
ment lab was born a winning idea:
the PICOWatt. It’s a wireless plug that
shows consumers how much electricity
their appliances are using, all from
one central location. It lets people
know when their electronics are suck-
ing too much juice—and money—out
of their household.

The team pitched the PICOWatt to
heavy hitters in the technology and
energy industries and quickly garnered
attention with an appearance
at the mammoth Consumer Electronics
Show, or CES, in Phoenix.

From there, the team formed Tenreh-te
Technologies Inc. (pronounced
“ten-ratt”) in March 2009. Indovina
is president and CEO. Tenreh-te’s
signature product—assembled, pack-
aged and shipped from Rochester—has
been winning awards and selling well
ever since.

The company is as much about
attitude as it is about energy. Case
in point: Its tagline is “Spank the Grid.”

What?

A few days before a trade show, the
Tenreh-te team was trying to come up
with a line that would capture what
the company stood for. Something
catchy. Something that said “energy.”

“Spank the Grid” was a winner.

“Russell came up with that gem,”
Indovina says, referring to chief tech-
nology officer Russell Priebe.

It’s about challenging the status quo,
bringing meaningful change to a global
industry whose infrastructure has not
kept pace with the times, empowering
consumers to take command of their
energy use at home and at work.

Oh, and there’s a T-shirt.

But what else does it mean to “Spank
the Grid”?

“We’re the office of the future,” Indov-
ina says. “People work out of their
homes. We have a facility in Webster;
otherwise we’re very lean.”

It is a sign of the times. The personal
and professional have blurred, which
is not always a bad thing.

“We don’t seem to have a separation
between work and life,” she says.
“I think the future of entrepreneurial
startups is letting people work where
they’re most comfortable. We meet
for lunch, then everybody pretty much
goes off and does their own thing.”

She sees that model leading her
company to a prominent future in
Rochester. She says the tipping point
will come when a major corporation
becomes its first customer—a break-
through Indovina says was crucial
for the likes of Microsoft.

“It’s just going to take us some time,”
she says. “We’re looking at all kinds
of applications. We’re looking for that
first big customer to take us to the
next level. Microsoft needed IBM. You
need that first big strategic partner.”

Whomever creates that tipping point
for Tenreh-te will have a few key
characteristics, she predicts.

“We’re pretty certain that it’s going
to be a corporation that’s interested
in getting into energy that wasn’t there
before, someone who’s interested in
the smart grid, but they haven’t gone
as far as we have yet—Cisco or
Siemens.”

Indovina speaks of the Rochester
region as a perfect place to catapult
her company. Her fondness—and
conviction—for the region is clear.

“It’s going to happen for us, and
for our area,” she says. “There are lots
of amazing engineering students right
here in Rochester, and there aren’t
enough jobs for them yet.”

She hopes Tenreh-te, in part, can
change that, especially by offering
a new generation of scientists the
meaning they long for in their work.

“Social entrepreneurship is being
ingrained in students now,” Indovina
says. “My generation doesn’t just want
to build throwaway products. This
generation of college grads is demand-
ing that type of company. We’re trying
to be what they’re looking for.”

Competition can be healthy. But the
days of climbing corporate ladders?
Extinct. Meaningful work, with
a moral center, is the future, Indovina
says.

“Stepping on people is old world,”
she says. “Only by elevating the people
around you can you be elevated.”

There’s never been a better time to stay
on the grid.

—Jonathan Everitt