

## BRIGHT OPPORTUNITIES

### SUNRNR Owners Experience Early Success With Product

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By **VIC BRADSHAW**

**SHENANDOAH** — What Jenny French asked a James Madison University professor to provide was an intern to help her local company crack the export code.

What she got was two classes of students who analyzed what countries could benefit most from the SUNRNR renewable energy generation and storage system. That effort spawned the chance to go on an international trade mission and sit beside the leader of the free world while discussing trade opportunities for small businesses.

French, president and part-owner of SUNRNR of Virginia, has been to the White House twice this year, and she returned from the weeklong Canary Islands trade mission a week ago. She and her business partners — her husband, Scott, the company's business manager, and Al Mattichak, SUNRNR's inventor and founder — think their product is poised for a breakthrough.

Though the company's profile boost has led to such opportunities, French said she'll feel better about what's taken place over the past two years once units are being sent overseas, 64 at a time, in 40-foot shipping containers.

“Ask me again when the first container goes,” said French, 53, of Harrisonburg. “It's all an incredible experience beyond what I expected, but the proof will be when a container goes out.”

#### School Project

SUNRNR (pronounced like ‘sunrunner’) is a portable and storable silent system that can capture and store power generated by the sun, wind or water. The storage component is key because the unit can provide electricity even when the generation source isn't available.



*SUNRNR technician Jake Sheets helps a patient at NeuroRestorative Virginia, a brain injury recovery center at Breezy Hill, on Tuesday as he assembles a SUNRNR solar generator shell. (Photos by Nikki Fox / DN-R)*



*Scott and Jenny French, part owners of SUNRNR, pose for a photo at the company's production site in Shenandoah. SUNRNR is a portable generator powered by sun, wind or water.*

In the United States, the system is valuable when access to the electric grid isn't available — such as at remote cabins, or on some construction sites — and as a backup source during power outages because up to 2,000 watts of power are stored for use.

Scott French — who grew up in Timberville, graduated from Broadway High School and co-owned F&K Auto Parts in Harrisonburg for 30 years — said it can power just about anything someone would plug into a wall receptacle.

Overseas, though, SUNRNR can mean potable water or lighting for Third World villages, a dependable electric source in outage-prone areas, and life-saving power following disasters. The product's value is easily grasped elsewhere because the needs are far greater.

Four units helped power a medical clinic on a Bahamian island following Hurricane Joaquin. A few businesses in Ghana use them to guard against an unreliable electric grid. Some villages use units to pump safe drinking water from wells.

Those opportunities quickly were realized by students in two of Marion White's international business classes.

Jenny French had done considerable homework about and received a lot of help with the complexities of international trade before asking White for an intern to help develop an international business plan.

The JMU professor, who wasn't available to comment this week, instead offered to have two classes take on SUNRNR as a project.

The classes, Jenny French said, were introduced to SUNRNR and programs offered by the Virginia Economic Development Partnership so they could learn about state resources at the company's disposal. At the end of the semester, they provided reports on 12 markets with the highest trade potential, including analysis of tariffs, demographics and culture.

"The kids were excited to have a real product to study," said French, a Virginia Tech graduate who earned a master's degree in aerospace engineering from Stanford University. "The end result was kids with real-world experience and us with 12 reports. We used them to determine which countries to focus on first."

## **Presidential Opportunity**

The JMU project led Jenny French to pursue more opportunities to learn about trade, raising SUNRNR's profile with state and federal officials. It was the lone Virginia business in United States of Trade, an office of the U.S. Trade Representative publication that highlighted a company in each state that could benefit from the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership trade agreement's passage.

That listing led to an invitation to come to the White House on March 25 to be one of nine companies participating in a Small Business Exporters Roundtable to discuss President Obama's foreign-trade agenda.

She found herself at a White House table with companies that sold tea, concrete and garage-door openers. The president sat immediately to her left.

The business representatives had a few minutes to talk about their companies, Jenny French said. After explaining SUNRNR, she planned to say it was an ideal product to export, but Obama beat her to it.

“He looked at her,” said Scott French, “and said, ‘Oh, yeah, I see your product is definitely better for exports.’”

## **Overseas Mission**

The trickle-down effects of the JMU project also led her to the Canaries.

Jenny French sought assistance from the Economic Development Partnership and U.S. Small Business Administration to learn how to navigate the complex world of international trade.

Her VEDP ties led to a connection with one of Sen. Mark Warner’s staff members. He introduced her to Carl Knoblock, an SBA export expert who advised her that SUNRNR should target a country and seek ways to send units there by container instead of shipping in small quantity.

SUNRNR landed a State Trade and Export Program grant from the VEDP and was encouraged to use it on the trade mission. The islands off the coast of Morocco were ideal because of Jenny French’s deductions from the JMU students’ reports.

“[The reports] led us toward West Africa first because of the need,” she said. “They have a serious power and water problem.”

A number of the nine companies on the mission had an energy focus. She met potential distributors as well as Wisdom Ahiataku-Togobo, Ghana’s Ministry of Power director.

Jenny French said she’s optimistic the meetings will yield sales. Exports account for less than 10 percent of the company’s business, which has averaged about 100 units a year for the past few years, but that could change.

“SUNRNR had an immediate solution to a real problem,” she said, “and I think once people understood what we had, there was a real excitement.”

## **‘Gift From God’**

SUNRNR also provided Mattichak real excitement when he awoke from a night’s sleep more than a decade ago.

The 57-year-old Port Republic resident had owned and operated Mattichak Energy for years, working with big generators and co-generation systems, but he had little interest in solar. So it surprised him to wake up one day with the vision for SUNRNR, including the name, firmly

implanted in his mind.

“It was,” he said, “a straight-up gift from God.”

He built one and it worked. He registered the SUNRNR name. He got a utility patent. He eventually contacted Scott French, a childhood friend who’d just sold his business.

As they’re made now, a unit weighs 260 pounds and the solar panels are 70 pounds. Handles and wheels allow two strong people to move them around.

Multiple units can be combined to provide more power.

“We can run just about anything,” said Mattichak, “if you bank enough SUNRNRs together.”

The unit and two solar panels cost \$4,350, but shipping hikes the acquisition cost for most clients. Solar tax credits, however, can help cover part of the expense for customers in America.

The company sources most components from United States companies. Jenny French said it is 73 percent American-made.

Shenandoah’s KVK Precision Specialties makes the steel parts. Patients at NeuroRestorative Virginia at Breezy Hill assemble the units on the late Zane Showker’s old property in northern Augusta County.

Eric Beck of Beck Builders said he’s used a SUNRNR for about a year to test it for construction purposes. It’s mainly fired up if a project needs to start before temporary power has been run to a site, but it came in handy one day when electric service was lost.

On the first job, he said, the unit couldn’t power a couple of tools he described as “pretty heavy duty,” but it’s met his power needs ever since.

“There’s an economy and independence that’s nice to have,” Beck said.

## **What’s Ahead**

Multiple companies have tried to copy SUNRNR but were smaller and less powerful and reliable, said Mattichak, who oversees production and provides technical support. Rather than burn money on patent-infringement claims, the owners reinvested in improvements and accessory and upgrade development.

The product’s creator said his invention was meant to “take power to the masses” and is capable of doing that. No units have been returned because they didn’t work.

“We’ve got enough of them sold that we have a good, real-world test base after 10 years,” Mattichak said. “It’s time now for it to go worldwide. It’s time to sell thousands of them.”

The Frenches are on the same page and are seeking the best way to get there.

While the company can reach its goal organically, Jenny French said they’d like to find a

strategic partner who knows the industry and can help them take the business to the next level.

“We need,” Scott French said, “an industry-savvy ally.”

SUNRNR’s “overnight success” has been seven years in the making, Jenny French said. The company could be on the verge of a breakthrough, which could generate more than electricity locally.

“We’re taking what we’ve learned over seven years and focusing on exports and easier ways to teach people about the product, like video,” she said. “With increased sales, we’ll be creating jobs in the Valley and bringing some manufacturing back to America.”

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