

## Making a Difference

# Harvesting Hope

One man broke a world record to prove his product's environmental promise.

▶ **AS A SMALL CROWD** gathered by a closed runway at a little airport outside Dallas, 40-something father of five Lane Segerstrom did an unlikely thing.

Stepping onto an extra-long skateboard made of pressed corn refuse, a novel material called CornBoard that he hopes to popularize as the next big thing in sports equipment and building materials, he grasped the back of an SUV that roared to life and took him on a wild ride in which he tried to break the record for the fastest speed on a towed skateboard—surpassing 74 mph.

The episode left *Guinness World Records* judge Amanda Mochan “with sweaty palms and a racing heart,” she noted afterward. The longboard had shot out from under Segerstrom’s feet several times during practice runs, but at least he wore a harness that kept him safe—that wouldn’t be true for the official try. “If the same thing happened while unharnessed, Lane could have gone flying along with the board. This is not something that anyone in attendance wanted to witness,” Mochan noted in a blog post.



See video of Lane Segerstrom's world record moment @ [SUCCESS.com/CornBoard](http://SUCCESS.com/CornBoard).

Finally the time came. As the Chevrolet Suburban raced down the runway on its first official run, the skateboard flew out from under Segerstrom. He held on for dear life, his body practically horizontal to the ground, with the tips of his steel-toed boots scraping pavement. But he didn't give up. Observers watched nervously as the second try began. The SUV reached 80.5 mph, and this time Segerstrom successfully stayed upright. Same for the next try. Averaging 78.1 mph that day in December 2010, he broke the world record. The corn-refuse longboard he trusted with his life currently resides in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C.

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Now the big question: *Why?*

“You’re either a genius or you’re crazy,” Segerstrom says now with a chuckle. “And I think more people put me in the crazy category, but that’s OK. I wanted to prove a point.”

All entrepreneurs stand behind their products. “Well, I stood *on* mine,” quips Segerstrom, who in 2009 founded Corn Board Manufacturing Inc. in McKinney, Texas, and later launched Stalk It, a line of sports boards like the one he used to get into the Guinness book. He says that by proving CornBoard is strong enough to set a record, it helps sales of the skateboards, snowboards, skis, paddle boards and surfboards while also capturing the imaginations of partners and potential partners. Just like wood, CornBoard could be used to make chairs. Or furniture. Cabinetry. Flooring.

His company is an experiment, and Segerstrom sees it as a possible game-changer for the environment: He takes corn “stover”—the stalks, husks, shanks, leaves and cobs left behind on cornfields after harvesting—and turns it into a pressed board. Farmers will earn money, more trees will remain standing and, if his plan is realized, the boards can be manufactured at small plants that dot the nation’s farm belt, plowing extra money into rural small-town economies.

So much corn stover is left on farms each year that it would wrap around Earth 21 times if it were gathered

**Sally Deneen,** a *SUCCESS* contributing editor based in Seattle, last wrote about Gary Vaynerchuk’s tips on social media in the February issue.



Surrounded by bales of “stover,” Corn Board founder Lane Segerstrom shows off his company’s potentially revolutionary product.

up and every bale placed end to end, Segerstrom figures. Iowa State University Extension estimates that a single acre of corn yields 8,000 pounds of stover, on average. Multiply that by the 87.4 million acres of grain corn harvested in the U.S. in a recent year, 2012, and you get plenty of stover—nearly 700 billion pounds of the stuff, which mostly is plowed back into the ground or sometimes fed to animals.

At least some stover must be plowed into the soil to avoid erosion and return nutrients to the earth. But farmers are increasingly interested in figuring out how to turn some of this “waste” into cash. “I think this is a potential opportunity for corn growers to get a little added value... a market that they didn’t have prior,” says Dennis Pennington, a bioenergy educator for Michigan State University Extension.

Corn stover is being used on a small scale already. Door and window manufacturer Jeld-Wen, based in Klamath Falls, Ore., is turning it into fiberboard for

doors. A couple of ethanol plants in Iowa are considering buying stover to turn into fuel. “I am not concerned,” Segerstrom says of the potential competition for stover. “The amount that is available is staggering.”

Building the company hasn’t been easy for Segerstrom. He licenses technology that was developed in a lab at the University of Illinois, and it’s taken much tinkering on his part to figure out how to take it from creation to market. He has been working with leftover lab-test-type presses that aren’t technically advanced (they’re akin to an “old Chevy,” he says). Early this year he received a specially designed press that took him a year to develop and was built in California—a model more akin to a Ferrari. With the new press he can test his ideas for duplicating small manufacturing plants across the nation’s breadbasket.

“We wanted to create a simple model that skilled labor could operate, but you wouldn’t need a Ph.D. or two to run,” Segerstrom says. The hope is that by

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keeping the model simple, it could be duplicated. “So that’s the next phase we’re going into,” he says. “And we’ve got agreements with multiple companies just waiting for the product in quantity to be able to make furniture, flooring, cabinetry and all these different things.”

So how good could this be for society and the planet as a whole?

“If the alternative is making chipboard from wood, then it probably is a good thing,” says Eric Johnson, who serves as editor in chief of *Environmental Impact Assessment Review*. Chipboard (or particleboard) generally has been made from sawdust. But thanks to a boom in the use of wood fuel made from sawdust, it’s now rather scarce. “And a lot of suppliers are cutting down trees to chip them,” Johnson says. “From a carbon standpoint, these trees usually would be better left standing. So if this is the case, stover is better because [the corn] will be harvested anyway. A tree, not necessarily so.”

The wrinkle comes in the process of converting stover to “wood,” Johnson says. If the transformation turns out to be very energy-intensive, it could cancel the possible benefit. Segerstrom is determined to make it a win-win.

Wesley Miller, a farmer who sells stover to Segerstrom’s company, says “it’s probably too early to tell” whether it’s worthwhile for him. “As a farmer deal, yeah, it’s OK. But it’s not big income.” Miller got involved to help Segerstrom’s company. “It’s a good-looking plywood. I guess you would say it is environmentally



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friendly because he didn’t have to cut down a tree. And here in the Texas Panhandle, you could look for 10 to 15 miles in most any direction and never see a tree.”

And so it goes. Segerstrom hopes to popularize CornBoard, but the product is still young. As obstacles arise, he’ll aim to pick himself up and press on. That’s exactly what he did after trying a particular trick to encourage his 8-year-old skateboarding son to keep practicing—only for Dad to end up breaking his arm in five places. He thought: *Is my last time on a skateboard going to be me crashing down and breaking my arm? Or am*

*I going to come out the other side and conquer this?*

A year later, he made *Guinness World Records*. (And his son *did* continue skateboarding.)

“My parents raised me on a farm,” says Segerstrom, who grew up outside Ida Grove, Iowa. “You pursued your dreams, and you worked hard to get there—the farming culture kind of does that. I want my children to pursue their dreams, and I want them to know that you can overcome whatever is put in front of you.” **S**