Two Bowling Green men have taken a classroom project and turned it into a product that will be available for purchase this month.

Jeffrey DeJarnette was in an engineering class at Western Kentucky University when he was tasked with reinventing an everyday item. DeJarnette looked at ways to improve key rings and came up with the idea of an organizer that folds keys into themselves. DeJarnette said it was a jingle-free way to hold a bunch of keys.

“I brought it home to Justin (Henderson), my roommate at the time, and we decided to take it a step further,” DeJarnette said.

So he and Henderson, an entrepreneurship major, started a business, Key Inventions. They convinced WKU to help them make their first sample. The item they came up with looks like a Swiss Army knife made out of hard plastic. The end of it has a spot to hold an electronic car key.

“It was easier once we had an item to show people,” Henderson said of marketing the devices. “But we had gotten as far as we could. We were broke and at a standstill for a year.”

Then they pitched the idea to WKU’s student accelerator program, and they were awarded $12,000 in seed money. Eighty percent of the funding went to making the tools and die needed to make the project.

“We wanted to make it in the United States but it was cost-prohibitive,” Henderson said. They ended up in November contracting with a Chinese company and have been working on getting a final product until last week when they took delivery on the first 30,000 of the organizers.

WKU has purchased 2,000 of the key organizers in red that they plan to emblazon with their logos and distribute. Southeastern Marketing & Distribution of Bowling Green purchased 5,000 of them to be sold beginning next week in about 80 area stores, including Minit Marts.

“We have suggested a $4.99 retail price, but I’m not sure what they will sell for,” Henderson said. “We have to sell just shy of 13,000 of them before we start making any money on them.”

Henderson and DeJarnette tried to get the item patented but couldn’t because someone patented something similar 54 years ago.

“But it didn’t really look anything like what we have made,” Henderson said. Still, a patent expert said it was similar enough that a patent probably would not be given. So they are trying to design add-ons that might give them something to patent. They also are considering an option that would have some pocket knife accessories such as a bottle opener and a flashlight.

“We also might make them with company logos on them,” Henderson said. Right now they are just made in red, black and blue, so they most likely appeal to men. The two joked that they might consider making some in pink to make them more attractive to women.

Henderson said he hopes it’s the start of other ideas for him. Right now he is a manager at Kentucky Downs.

“But I hope at some point that I don’t have to work for anyone else,” he said.
Starting a business is in Henderson’s blood, something his parents, Janet and Robert Henderson, have done several times.

DeJarnette still has about a year left in WKU’s engineering program. He’s working as a tour guide at the General Motors Bowling Green Assembly Plant while going to school. Both men said that their parents are proud of them starting a business at such a young age. They are 23.

Key Inventions received a newcomer award at last month’s Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce Business and Industry Appreciation Banquet.

— For more information, visit key-inventions.com.