

## Bar Talk

PEOPLE AND PRACTICES

### *Seeing the light*

Ethan Smith was just a college student at UC-Santa Barbara when he discovered a technology traditionally used in the printing industry could be adapted to create a computer interface for the blind.

#### Sidebar

Now, with a little help from his friends at Sheppard, Mullin, Richter & Hampton, Smith has filed for a provisional patent and is on the road to launching his own business.

"It hadn't occurred to me to file a provisional patent application," said Smith, who is now 24 and working on his master's degree. "It turned out to be pretty important,"

since another research group was working on a similar project.

Sheppard special counsel Jeffrey McKinney made the suggestion after the two connected last year at a California Coast Venture Forum networking event.

"He had approached [Sheppard partner Joseph] Nida about becoming an IP lawyer," said McKinney. "He must be aware it is a dashing and sexy job."

The two talked about Smith's idea of using microfluidics — a technology that involves the release of small puffs of air — to create Braille text for computer screens. Smith wanted to enter his project in UC-

Santa Barbara's technology management program business plan competition.

McKinney offered up his services — pro bono — and now Smith is further developing the product he hopes to launch upon completion of his degree. In the meantime, Smith's idea has brought him no shortage of success.

Not only did he win the university's business plan contest, he also picked up prizes at University College London's London Entrepreneurs' Challenge and London Business School's Technology Feasibility Competition.

— Marie-Anne Hogarth