Web Comic Fuels Donations To Tesla's NY Lab

Frank Eltman, Associated Press

SHOREHAM, N.Y. (AP) — A jolt of support from a popular Web cartoonist has re-energized a decades-long effort to restore a decrepit, 110-year-old laboratory once used by Nikola Tesla, a visionary scientist who was a rival of Thomas Edison and imagined a world of free electricity.

In little more than a week, tens of thousands of donors from more than 100 countries have kicked more than $1 million through a social media fundraising website to pay for the restoration of Nikola Tesla's Wardenclyffe laboratory, located about 65 miles east of New York City. A small band of followers who have struggled to establish a science and research museum and learning center in his honor are giddy with delight about the lightning-quick response they have received.

"Enormously, overwhelmingly, astounding," is how Jane Alcorn, president of the Tesla Science Center at Wardenclyffe and a retired school librarian, described her feelings about the project's newfound fortune. The not-for-profit formed about 17 years ago had managed to secure a state matching grant of $850,000 but had amassed only about $50,000 for the project. Its goal at times seemed insurmountable.

Then this summer Alcorn learned that Matthew Inman, a cartoonist who runs theoatmeal.com, posted a tribute to the scientist titled "Why Nicola Tesla is the Greatest Geek Who Ever Lived." Supporters of the Long Island effort reached out to Inman, a 27-year-old who lives in Seattle, and he and Alcorn began speaking.

Last week, he posted a request for donations on IndieGoGo, a fundraising website, and the response was nearly instantaneous. At 6 p.m. on Aug. 15, the plea went out, and before Alcorn went to bed that night, donors had given nearly a quarter million dollars.

"I was blown away by that," Alcorn said. "I kept refreshing the page and refreshing the page and the number kept going up. I went to bed after 1 that night, but I didn't really get any sleep, to be honest."

Inman, who is in Japan this week on business, told The Associated Press that he thinks "Tesla would be very pleased to see this many people kind of worshipping him as this geek hero" and backing it up with credit card donations by the thousands to restore his lab.

Tesla amassed hundreds of patents for his discoveries over his lifetime. Among his most notable accomplishments are his work in developing alternating current and other research in the creation of wireless communication and radio. He worked for Edison in the 1880s, but later became a rival. Tesla died in New York City in 1943.

For about 15 years in the early 1900s, Tesla worked at the lab in Shoreham, which was designed by noted architect Sanford White. He conducted experiments with wireless electricity and erected a 187-foot tower that Alcorn said was to be the centerpiece of a worldwide communications and energy system. But after he lost funding for the project, it was torn down in 1917.

Inman's cartoon also ignited an intense online discussion between supporters of Edison and Tesla over whose contributions to science were greater, he said.

"I realized how damn awesome it was that the whole Internet was getting in this raging debate about inventors who have been dead for 70 years or more," Inman said.

Inman plans to attend New York Comic Con in Manhattan in October and said he hopes to make a detour to the lab.

Beginning in the 1930s, the Tesla site was used as a photo chemical processing plant, but that was closed in 1993 after it was determined the area's groundwater had been polluted with cadmium and silver. The current owners, Belgian-based AGFA Corp., worked for years to decontaminate the site, and regulators deemed the remediation complete this year.

Despite a six-foot chain-link fence surrounding the property, many of the buildings have been vandalized, said real estate agent John O'Hara, who is representing AGFA in the sale. Graffiti and broken windows are a constant problem, and O'Hara said locks on gates have been broken numerous times. He confirmed the property has a $1.6 million asking price, but added that is negotiable.

O'Hara has received hundreds of inquiries for the property over the past several years, but because of the environmental clearance, interest has begun to accelerate. Recently, a group of Russian-based Tesla enthusiasts contacted him about a possible purchase. Others have suggested constructing a small housing development on part of the property and leaving the rest to the Alcorn's group for a science center.

Inman said the recent expressions of interest by others in the property also fueled his efforts to get involved.

Alcorn said one of the group's best supporters is Long Island filmmaker Joe Sikorski. He donated $33,000 to the effort this week, officially pushing the fundraising goal over its $850,000 target to meet the offer of state matching funds. "People don't understand the historical significance," Sikorski said. "Not only did Sanford White design the laboratory, which is notable in itself, but Tesla hoped to give free wireless energy to the world from this site. Tesla sacrificed everything for this, and he died penniless."

Sikorski has co-written a screenplay about Tesla's work at Wardenclyffe. He committed to donate $1 million from the proceeds of the film to the science center but said funding for the project recently fell through when a major investor became

ill.

Alcorn confessed she knew little about Tesla when she got involved 17 years ago. She lived down the street from the shuttered property and helped a local high school start a modest science museum, consisting of two classrooms with a few small stuffed animals and other displays. As that effort grew, she learned more about Tesla's connection to the community.

"Some people say I'm stubborn," she said as she reflected on the events of the past few weeks, and the prospect that dreams she and others have shared for many years may come to fruition.

"I say I'm tenacious."

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