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business

## Local solar company gets its day in the sun

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The Denver Post

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Talk about your word-of-mouth advertising.

Blake Jones, a founder of Namaste Solar Electric Inc., got the plug of a lifetime Tuesday from President Barack Obama in Denver.

Clad in a loose, sky-blue sweater over an open-collared shirt, Jones introduced Obama before the president signed the historic \$787 billion economic-stimulus package at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science.

Obama came to Colorado to ink the package because the state is at the forefront of the nation's push toward renewable energy.

"I was incredibly nervous but happy at the same time," said Jones, 34, whose company installed the solar panels on the roof of the museum a year ago.

He said he locked eyes with his wife, Alli, in the front row of the

museum atrium to stay calm while he gave his five-minute speech extolling renewable energy.

"The only thing I would compare it to in intensity, happiness and nervousness was my wedding day," Jones said.

Before the speech, Obama and Vice President Joe Biden followed Jones up the museum stairway to the roof for a firsthand look at the solar installation.

"He wanted to know all about costs," Jones said of Obama. "He was really inquisitive. He said, 'Tell me about the cost of solar and how it compares to other energy.'"

"He also asked where solar panels are manufactured. So I had a chance to tell him how, unfortunately, most of them are manufactured in Germany and China. The countries did so years ago, before we caught on, and as a result they're benefiting a lot now."

### Namaste more than a name

The White House didn't just pluck Namaste out of the Yellow Pages. The employee-owned company has fastened solar panels to rooftops linked to some of Colorado's most influential Democratic politicians, from U.S. Sen. Mark Udall's home and U.S. Rep. Ed Perlmutter's business to the Governor's Mansion, currently inhabited by Bill Ritter.

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Ritter enlisted Jones' advice during his campaign in 2006, inviting Jones to



Namaste's Blake Jones shows Obama and Vice President Joe Biden the museum's rooftop solar panels. (Ruth Fremson, The New York Times)

roundtable discussions to hash out the alternative-energy pieces to Ritter's platform.

Such a connection and others, Jones acknowledged, must have paid off.

"We've been pretty deeply involved in policy," he said.

During Obama's speech, which Namaste employees attended, the president commended the 55-person company for its "outstanding work."

Jones has a long history of relentlessly researching and talking about solar energy. Prior to starting the business in 2004, he was a disillusioned engineer for energy giant

Halliburton. The dirty processes, the inefficiencies of petroleum energy □ they all disheartened him, Jones said.

"We spilled stuff and we didn't clean it up," he recalled. "We burned stuff. I look back on those projects now and I can't believe it, I can't believe what we were doing. I had a gradual awakening to the disadvantages of our overdependence on fossil fuels."

Years of witnessing how other countries embraced alternative energy hooked him. Partly at the urging of his brother, Jones decided to pursue his own enterprise.

### "Word-of-mouth" growth

Namaste, which Jones founded with two other partners, has installed more than 600 solar-cell systems across the state, largely through "word of mouth." His company rapidly grew, but business has fallen off in the past year because of the frozen credit markets.

Five days ago, one phone call □ from the White House □ may have changed the company's fortunes radically.

The administration staffers wanted to know how the pending stimulus bill □ providing roughly \$130.2 million in energy investments for Colorado □ could help Namaste.

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President Barack Obama and employees of Namaste Solar Electric Inc. pose for a photograph after he signed the \$787 billion economic stimulus bill at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science. Blake Jones, a company founder, is standing on Obama's right side. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

jokingly mangling Biden's name, saying "Bidden" and drawing laughter from company employees.

By the end of the afternoon, Namaste's Web page had crashed repeatedly from burgeoning Internet traffic. And while Namaste's employees, seated at one side of the stage, reveled in the attention of the handshaking president, nobody was left to man the office phones back in Boulder.

But these, Jones said, were all good problems to have.

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Additional grants, Jones remembers telling them, could prevent deep financial cuts that would lead to job layoffs.

Almost that quickly, the White House had its poster boy, one to promote alternative-energy strides and job-saving benefits of the stimulus legislation. Over the next few days, the Obama's staff worked with Jones on the choreography: how they would don the casual clothing they usually work in and how they would somehow be prominently showcased.

On the podium □ and despite what Jones said afterward □ he showed few nerves, even

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