

Safko Finds A Substitute for the Keyboard

BY JOANNA PAN

"I remember the future. I see things completed that never existed and I remember them," Lon Safko of Safko International, Inc. says.

Safko may seem like a character straight out of Ray Bradbury. Though he is not the stuff of science fiction, he has managed to put science to provocative new use. Safko

"Disabled, handicapped, what's the difference?" asks Safko. "Disabled people aren't handicapped. They have a disabling pre-existing condition, but they're still out there doing everything that everybody else does."



LON SAFKO developed the first voice-activated computer designed specifically for the disabled. Photo by Tom O'Connell

International, Inc. designs computer systems which vastly extend the worlds and voices of the mentally and physically disabled.

Safko, who was raised in Ossining and completed his undergraduate education in Westchester, did not plan an entree into the world of assistive technology systems for the disabled. As a civil engineering student in 1975, he admits he thought there were "five or six disabled people on the planet." After finishing school, Safko

browsing customer gazed in utter amazement over Safko's shoulder. Suddenly, the stranger made a heartfelt appeal to Safko. "I've got a big problem," said the gentleman. "I need technology for the physically disabled. There's a friend of mine in St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Yakima [Washington], and he has three weeks to live. . ."

The stranger went on to explain that a mechanical engineer he knew had been entertaining a quadriplegic friend at his home during the Christmas holiday. When the wheelchair carrying the engineer's friend threatened to tumble full-force down a flight of stairs, the engineer tried to rein the chair towards his own body in a desperate attempt to save his friend from certain injury. Instead, the engineer was flipped head-first over his friend's wheelchair, broke his neck and, in an eerie twist of irony, was himself rendered a quadriplegic.

Safko contacted the biggest names in hardware and software development, searching for technologies which were specifically designed to interface with users who did not have the means to manipulate the traditional mouse/keyboard interfaces used by the non-disabled.

Even though the search proved futile, Safko told the stranger. "One month from now I'll have a computer [system] for your

friend," and set to work. The result — now known as the Sensei System — became the first voice-activated computer designed specifically for the disabled.

After seeing Safko's innovative technology on the Today Show in 1988, the board of directors at Westinghouse Electric, Safko's employer at the time, "fired" him from the project he was working on. Then they presented him with the key to his own corporate headquarters — a dazzling complex encompassing 2,000 square feet complete with a gold plaque emblazoned with the name of the new company, "Safko International, Inc."

According to Safko, there are 43 million disabled people in America as of the 1990 census. Unlike other minority groups in America, many persons with disabilities have been unable to voice themselves and be counted. This one man has done more than just meet a need with technological services. He has bestowed an American minority group with the power to cross over from handicapped to disabled. "Disabled, handicapped, what's the difference?" asks Safko. "Disabled people aren't handicapped," he says. "They have a disabling pre-existing condition, but they're still out there doing everything that everybody else does."

For more information, contact Safko International, Inc. at Suite B-240, Tempe, Arizona 85282 or (602) 731-9805.

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worked on highway and water projects in Westchester, eventually starting his own company, Civil Consultants, in 1981.

In 1985, Safko moved to Washington State and became sales manager for two Apple computer stores. But his interests in computer science and software development continued unabated. When he was not selling other people's products, Safko was working on a graphics program of his own that could recognize and implement oral commands.

During a slow week in early 1986, Safko sat at one of the store's terminals with arms folded; as graphics jumped, moved, and coalesced at the sound of his voice, a