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The gift of independence

By JULIA De SIMONE
Staff Writer

Lon Safko and his associates of Safko International, Inc., are putting smiles back on the faces of some people who once lived in the dark.

Mr. Safko, a Gilbert resident, could be Richie Rich in disguise, with his welcoming smile and adolescent features. But instead of marveling over numerous toys, Mr. Safko would rather devote time to his main creation, the SenSei (Japanese for master teacher) system — apple computer programs which allow some people who were once confined to a wheelchair, the ability to turn the radio on, phone a friend and even read a book.

"It really takes them from the threshold of death to functioning in society," he said.

The computer wiz who recently received the Computer/Software Product of the Year Award by the Arizona Innovation Network, said the SenSai allows his clients to "do anything you and I can by looking and puffing at a computer."

For example, many abled-body people use their hands along with the function of a "mouse" when using a computer. But because many of Mr. Safko's clients have limited or no movement in many parts of their bodies, they need another means to function the computer.

So, by using input devices, such as the puff stick — a device that allows the used control of all mouse functions by mouth and head movements — his clients are able to activate programs.

The main program, the replica of a home, equipped with bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchen, etc. allows the client to click on the designated room with their chosen device and then depending on what they need from their room, can operate a fans raise the volume on their stereo system or perform an array of other

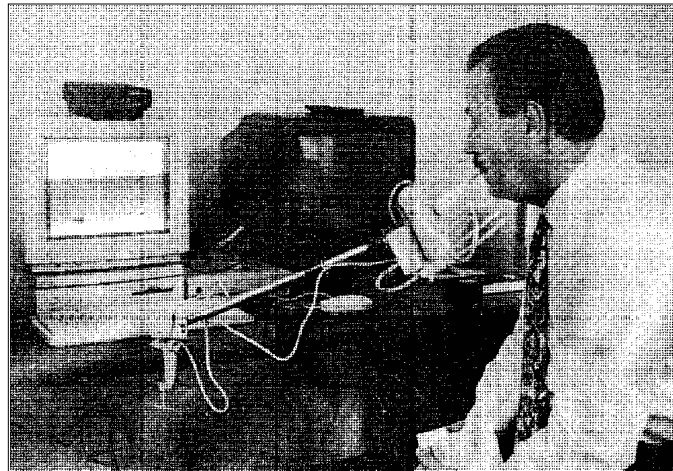


Photo by JULIA DeSIMONE/Gilbert Independent

Lon Safko demonstrates his SenSei system, which gives people with disabilities independence.

tasks, which abled-body people take for granted.

"I have people without arms typing 48 words per minute," Mr. Safko said. "It still fascinates me to see how these people's life can change."

The cost of the SenSei is \$15,000. Mr. Safko said depending on certain cases, insurance companies, such as State Farm, will foot some of the bill. He added that companies are supportive of the SenSai because it's "improving quality of life at one-tenth of the cost."

Furthermore, it's allowing people with disabilities, the self-esteem needed to progress in society.

Keith Fischer, Safko engineer, who has been

with the company since 1988, expressed this point.

"It's nice to see everything come to place and they're completely independent," he said. "That's what's nice — as soon as we walk out of there (their home), it completely changes their life."

But Mr. Safko's success wasn't overnight. After receiving his civil engineering degree, he took a number of computer science courses at a time where, he said the closest thing to a computer was the "side of a refrigerator."

In 1982, he formed a successful company, Civil Consultants in Westchester, New York.

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Seeking a change, he moved to Washington state, managing two Apple computer stores.

It was there that his life changed, telling a true story similar to the Gift of the Magari, but non-fiction.

He said while working, a customer pleaded to him to help his distraught friend. The customer said his friend was entertaining a friend who was a quadriplegic on Thanksgiving Day. While helping his quadriplegic friend downstairs, the man lost control of the wheelchair and it accidentally fell on him, breaking his neck.

Shortly thereafter the man's wife left him, his house was repossessed and all his savings had been eaten up to pay for hospital bills. His last resort was Mr. Safko, who after intensive research calling companies only to find no computer programs to aid the disabled existed, he called the man and bought time.

Presto! The SenSei was created and implemented in this man's home. The man was doing engineering consultant work living in his own condominium and completely independent.

"If I could save this person's life, maybe, I could do it for a million people," Mr. Safko said.

Statistics show that alone in 1991-92, there were 48.9 million Americans with disabilities, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and

Statistics Administration.

"There's 48.9 million legally disabled people and I don't think we see them," Mr. Safko said.

So, it's this reasoning which keeps Mr. Safko and his 17 full and part time employees, along with his six consultants, plugging away at their Tempe based office.

He'll admit each time he gets ready to set up his client's SenSai, some are so reserved, they refuse to talk to him.

"Some won't talk to me because they're ready to die, but I don't take them that serious...because in a couple of weeks they're not going to think that," he said.

And in a couple of weeks, when he returns, a dark room has been lit up, not by a nurse's aid, a family member or even a friend, but by an independent person.

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