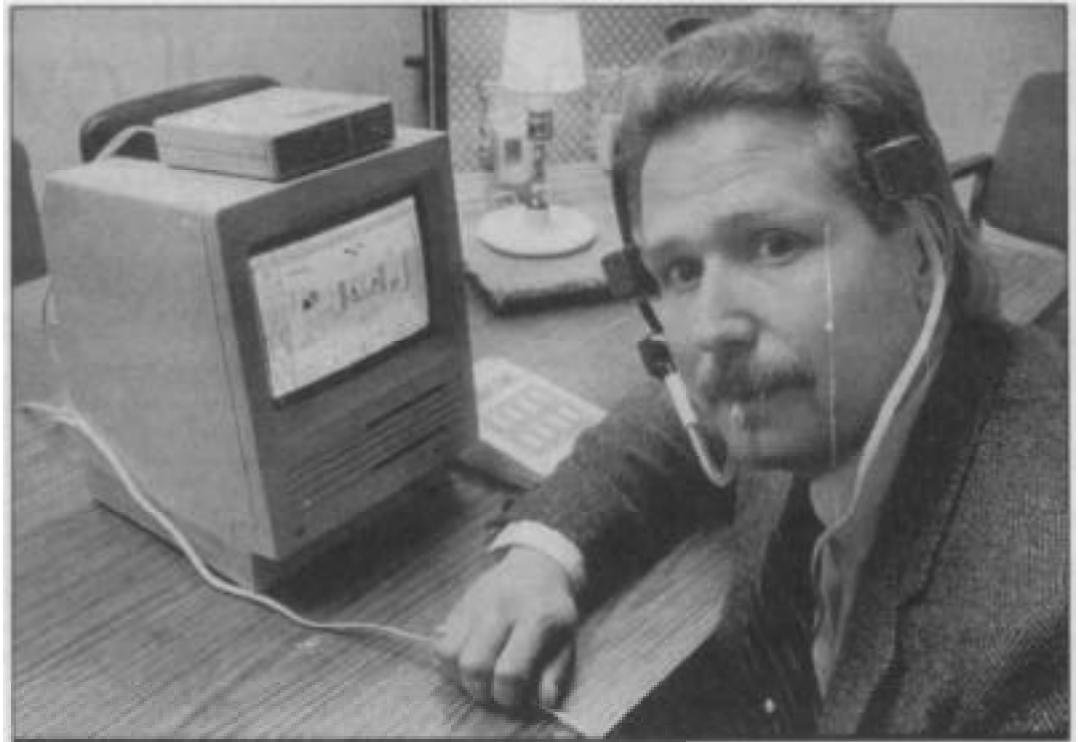


TECHNOLOGY/PRODUCTS

"For severely and profoundly disabled individuals, the computer is no longer a luxury, but a necessity," says inventor Lon Safko.



Gannett/Mark Vergan

Yonkers-born inventor markets computer headset for disabled

By Terri Hall
Staff Writer

Just because you've built a better mousetrap — or think you have — the world doesn't necessarily beat a path to your door.

So Lon Safko, 32, a Washington state inventor born in Yonkers and reared in Ossining, is beating down doors to help tout his brainstorm — a computer system designed to help quadriplegics and other disabled persons become independent.

Safko's "SenSei" system allows quadriplegics to control their environment as well as develop their own in-house "cottage industry" and learn to be self-supporting. The system, Japanese for "master-teacher," according to Safko, uses an Apple Macintosh SE computer, a special headset that allows people to operate the computer by moving their heads and puffing into a tube, and commercially available software compatible with Apple systems, to which Safko has

people for about \$7,000 — and that they would then be able to make any required modifications themselves.

But Dr. Alan Brightman, director of special education for Apple Computer Inc., said Safko is merely one of hundreds of "third-party vendors and entrepreneurs in the field trying to come up with something for people who need it" and that a system such as Safko's probably can be put together for far less than Safko's price.

"A person like Lon Safko is either too small to make his products known to people who can use them — or he makes them with costs that are higher than they ought to be," Brightman said from Apple's Cupertino, Calif., headquarters. "A \$7,000 device might as well be restricted to a lab setting. There are a lot of other ways to accomplish the environmental control ends that he's trying to accomplish."

Apple does not produce such

Safko, a former civil engineer and Apple salesman, became interested in developing a computer system for the handicapped after he injured an ankle and found himself trapped on the couch, unable to reach light switches and television controls.

Earlier voice-activated systems designed by Safko have been used successfully with a couple of patients in hospitals in Washington and Idaho. Safko is trying to sell the SenSei system to hospitals and veterans' organizations.

"I'm trying to get the word out to let people know there are things available," he said.

Brightman agreed that such systems can solve many problems for some people.

"It used to be that the computer for a lot of people was considered a luxury," Brightman said. "I believe that for severely and profoundly disabled individuals, the computer is no longer a luxury, but a necessity — in the same way that a wheelchair is a necessity. There