

Talking Handheld Device Excites Blind People

by John Williams

Legally blind, Tomas Garcia was so gratified when he heard about the revolutionary Kurzweil-National Federation of the Blind Reader that he vowed to find a second job so he can pay the \$3,500 to buy one.

An eager Garcia said, "The handheld, talking device eliminates print barriers for me. By doing so it opens up new employment opportunities and entertainment avenues."

The device combines state-of-the-art digital camera with a powerful personal data assistant, the "camera that talks" unites character recognition software with text-to-speech conversion technology in a single, handheld device.

"My 15-year-old son can certainly use this magnificent device," art designer Michael Edwards said. His son is blind. Edwards says he's never seen such a powerful communications device for blind people. Edwards pays for a reader to help his son with his schoolwork. He sees the device as a cost-saving tool because it should reduce the time the reader spends with his son.

Garcia says he imagines himself holding the Reader over a newspaper, birthday card, book, and listening to the contents being read back. The speech is so clear, he adds, that it's worth the price.

The device offers readers a choice of hearing a full page, or just a few lines for identification purposes. For blind people living in an information age, the Reader can store thousands of printed pages with easily obtainable extra memory and users can transfer files to their desktop and laptop computers or Braille Notetakers. Purchasers receive a headphone jack as well, so they will not disturb others in close proximity.

This device will benefit senior citizens wanting to retain their independence. James Gashel, NFB's Executive Director for Strategic Initiatives, said: "Every year 75,000 more people will become blind or visually impaired in this country. As America's aging population soars over the next few decades, so too will the incidence of visual impairment and blindness. The Reader will help not only blind individuals, but older Americans who wish to stay independent and age with dignity."

Sixty-nine-year old Mimi Holliday who is losing her eyesight says, "I can remain independent with this device." She said she learned to use it in minutes.

The National Federation of the Blind helped fund the development and production of the Reader and helped plan and design it, especially with respect to the user interface. As many as 500 NFB "Pioneer's" have tested and influenced the design of the Reader.

Ray Kurzweil, who partnered with NFB to develop the Reader, has been called the "Thomas Edison of the 21st century." Kurzweil is chief executive officer of KNFB Reading Technology, Inc.

Readers went on sale on July 1, 2006. Those interested in purchasing the Kurzweil-National Federation of the Blind Reader can call (877) 708-1724 or visit <http://www.nfb.org/>.