

POST-POLIO HEALTH

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Ralph: The Home Assistant

Debbie Hardy, Whittier, California

Do you ever wish you had a personal butler, valet or concierge at your beck and call? The reality is you may be able to purchase one in the form of an automated technology system for your home. The system, known as Ralph, is a voice-commanded control, monitoring and supervisory system. It uses voice recognition to take commands from the home's occupants and talks back to them with speech synthesis. For those who prefer not to use the voice command system, a pushbutton control is available. Ralph helps people live independently in their own homes by doing small things they cannot do for themselves.



Don Holbert with nearly invisible "friend," Ralph.
PHOTOS COURTESY OF RANDY KIRBY



He decided to automate things in the house that needed to be done on a daily basis, and created a "digital companion" that could talk as well as respond to verbal commands.

The system was originally developed to help Don Holbert. Don, who is paralyzed below the waist (*See Don's Story, page 2.*), unable to adjust the thermostat or open the drapes, thought his only options were to either sell his home or hire someone to stay with him. He was unhappy with these choices, so his friends came to the rescue and remodeled his house, making it more accessible for him.

One of those friends, Greg Corpier, a computer consultant and engineer, also decided to automate things in the house that needed to be done on a daily basis and created a "digital companion" that could talk as well as respond to verbal commands. Don named his companion "Ralph."

Ralph was installed in Don's home in 2001. Except for the monitor, keyboard, tiny speakers and motion detectors mounted on the walls, Ralph remains invisible and is multi-talented. He opens and closes drapes, blinds and doors, and controls lights, ceiling fans, and TV, VCR, DVD and stereo systems. Ralph can answer the door and telephone and can act as an answering machine. He reminds Don when to get up, take medication and eat. Ralph can make a shopping list, control thermostats for air conditioning and heating, and operate small appliances. He turns on a recirculator pump enabling Don to be able to walk into a dry shower on his crutches (lessening the chance of a slip and fall) and have instant warm water. Ralph acts as a personal motion monitor and is able to call specific people for help if Don falls and is unable to get up. Ralph advises of weather conditions, reads the newspaper aloud, types and reads email, and acts as a home security system. He has given Don peace of mind by being a 24-hour-a-day personal assistant – always ready, willing and able to help.

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Although this automated technology system was originally designed to help people with disabilities, it is available for purchase by anyone who would like to have such a system. Ralph can be customized for your individual needs and sized to fit any home from a cottage to a mansion. For more information, contact Greg Corpier (866-315-6967, greg@ralphmyfriend.com) or visit www.ralphmyfriend.com. ●

Don's Story (donh1@swbell.net)

In 1949, shortly after my fifth birthday, I was diagnosed with polio. After spending 4½ months in the hospital, I returned home wearing braces on both legs and using crutches to help me walk.

I attended a special school in Kansas City, Missouri, for physically disabled students that offered both physical and occupational therapy as part of our regular school day.

At age 22, I married and we had three children. After 15 years, we divorced and I retained custody of the children. Though busy raising three children and working full-time, I managed to find time for a relationship and remarried. In 1981, my middle daughter was involved in athletics and I began volunteering with the Special Olympics. My volunteer service progressed from chaperon to coach to the state board to an employee as a director covering sixteen counties in Mid-Missouri.

In 2001, my wife became ill and died. I was alone and depressed. In addition to missing her love and companionship, I realized all of the little things my wife had done to make life easier for me. If it hadn't been for my family and friends, and the installation of a home-automated technology system known as Project Ralph (See cover article, "Ralph: The Home Assistant."), I might have given up.

In 2003, a woman on the Governors Council of Disabilities came to my home to assess the Ralph system. Later, I learned that in addition to checking out Ralph, she was also checking me out. A year later, we were married. She has made me feel alive again and, even though we both have limitations, we are very happy to have a new start at life together.

NEW BOOK

Aging with a Disability: What the Clinician Needs to Know

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.
Edited by Bryan J. Kemp, PhD, and
Laura Mosqueda, MD.

Kemp and Mosqueda are director and co-director, respectively, of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Aging with a Disability at Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey, California. (2004. \$55 hardcover, #0-8018-7816-0. \$24.95 paperback, #0-8018-7817-9. 328 pp, 20 illustrations.) The chapter on post-polio syndrome in the book is written by Jacquelin Perry, MD.

With advances in medical care, technology and rehabilitation, people with disabilities are now living longer. Many have near-average life expectancies. Research has shown that the changes and problems associated with aging often occur 10–20 years earlier in the lives of people with disabilities than in the lives of people without disabilities.

Aging with a Disability provides clinicians with a complete guide to the care and treatment of persons aging with a disability. This book first addresses the perspective of the person with a disability and his or her family. Chapters in the second section address the physiological and functional changes people will face as they grow older, and how these changes may affect quality of life and caregiver requirements. In the third part, contributors discuss treatment considerations such as maintaining employment and managing pain and fatigue. The book's fourth section focuses on specific conditions: spinal cord injury, polio, cerebral palsy, and developmental disabilities.

The concluding section presents research needs and discusses policy issues for future consideration. ●