

Chatty computer 'speaks' for handicapped

Say hello to Jim Brooks these days and he'll probably answer back, "Hello." That may not sound like much. Unless you know Brooks has both spastic and athetoid cerebral palsy, and never spoke a single intelligible word in 23 years.

But now the Grand Rapids Junior College student has a portable computer to do the talking for him. He is the latest and most well-equipped of the "nonverbal" people helped by the computer wizardry of Michigan State University's Artificial Language Laboratory.

Jim Brooks is tentatively scheduled to give the invocation before the Michigan Senate at 8 p.m. Monday, Oct. 15, at the State Capitol in Lansing.

Adapting the latest breakthroughs in microcomputers, the university's computer science engineers have started even themselves with a growing ability to free severely handicapped individuals from some of the limitations of their bodies. "It is hard even for professional people to realize that these devices are now beyond the point of being experimental," said laboratory director Mortezia Rahimi.

ists mounted a microcomputer to his electric wheelchair. Brooks operates it the way he does the wheelchair: with his right foot, the part of his body he can control.

If Brooks wants to say hello, crack a joke or ask his teacher to explain a physics problem, he types out a message with a device called a "Joy stick" mounted under his footrest. Words are displayed on a small terminal on the wheelchair and spoken aloud by a voice synthesizer. Brooks can talk anywhere he can maneuver his wheelchair.

His voice comes out flat and nasal. But until this summer Brooks communicated through a device used by many nonverbal people, called a Bliss board. A marker is moved from symbol to symbol to form words, concepts and sentences. "Only a few people know how to use a Bliss board and few will take the time, even if they know how," Brooks notes.

Give a man who has been mute for 13 years the chance to talk and what will he want to say? If the man is Jim Brooks, he'll talk about the right to speak.

FOLLOWING is the text of a speech given by Brooks at the Aug. 26-31 Interagency Conference on Rehabilitation Engineering in Atlanta, Ga. He stored the words of his address in the computer's memory, and played them back later.

"For 23 years I could not talk in a manner that everyone could understand me. I did use a Bliss board but only a few people are willing to take the time to use a Bliss board. I became frustrated because that mode of communication was so slow and it was difficult to express my ideas.

I feel nonverbal kids cannot perform at their fullest potential in a classroom setting because they cannot ask questions or answer the teachers' question which the teacher poses to the class.

I cannot blame the teachers altogether as it is impractical to hold up the whole class while she stops to decode what the nonverbal student is trying to say on a Bliss board.

But doesn't the nonverbal child of our modern society have the right to an equal education? Is it too bad that society puts so much emphasis on the ability to command the spoken word — to say nothing of being rejected by your peers, this hurts. In fact I believe this could even cause psychological problems late in life. If you ever tried asking a girl for a date on a Bliss board you would know that you have three strikes against you already.

"These are just a couple of reasons why computerized communication tools are so sorely needed. I would like to take time here to thank the staff of the Artificial Language Laboratory for this fantastic system and my counselor and the Michigan Bureau of Rehabilitation for having the foresight to fund my system. I am sure it will enrich my life in every way. I am sorry every nonverbal person doesn't have a communication tool.

I get upset to think that we can put men on the moon and talk with them from earth millions of miles away, and that is all well and good; but when there are people right here that have been robbed of the gift of speech — and it is a gift — I think we should use that technology to help people communicate with each other. When we help nonverbal people to communicate in an acceptable manner then they can get to the moon or whatever. Note I said when not if, we can help nonverbal people to communicate. The technology is here — we just have to change our priorities."

Brooks plans to graduate from Grand Rapids Junior College next spring, then study business and computer programming at MSU and become a computer analyst.

IN BROOKS' case, the computer special-

Witch Watch

by GUNDELLA

Tea leaves have symbolic meanings

Dear Gundella: I have been trying to read tea leaves. I see things, but I can't interpret them. Can you help me?

Rose S. Farmington

Dear Rose: Tea leaves, wax drippings, coffee grounds, champagne bubbles and the foam on beer glasses are all read the same way.

Sometimes I interpret them literally. For instance, a cat would mean exactly that — a cat.

Sometimes I use a symbolic meaning. In this case, a cat would mean gossip.

Here are some commonly seen symbols and their interpretations:

Arrow: a beginning or an end to something; can also mean news.

Box: secrets.

Bull: hard work ahead.

Butterfly: illusions.

Circle: a lasting marriage.

Cross: balance in one's life; work, play, love, worship.

Cube: emphasis on material matters.

Dove: peace.

Dog: something that cannot be hidden.

Dragon: evil.

Eagle: strength.

Eyes: new awareness or a secret revealed.

Feet: pain and problems.

Fish: prosperity.

Fire: deep emotion.

Flowers: love.

Fork: good luck.

Goat: selfishness and materialism.

Hand: right hand — will receive money; left hand — will lose money.

Lamp: knowledge.

Light: life, movement and change.

Line: straight, a journey, vertical — north or south; horizontal — east or west; wavy — indecision.

Lion: must overcome opposition.

Pyramid: secrets.

Scales: justice; right will out.

Snake: temptation.

Star: life.

Sun: a love affair.

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Contributors receive a photograph of the Leader Dog team if the dog trains successfully. If the dog is rejected, it will be returned to the owner, if desired. If not, it will be placed in a good home.

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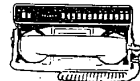
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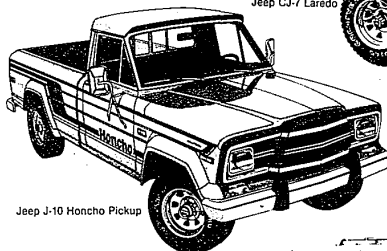
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