

New Technology for Individuals with Blindness or Visual Impairment

By [Bonnie Bartos](#) posted 07-31-2019 13:33

I interviewed my friend, Sam Foust, over a year ago and intended to write a blog post on the information gained right away. He had recently returned from his technology learning session at the Veteran's Administration's Central Blind Rehabilitation Center (CBRC), a residential or inpatient blind rehab site in Hines, Illinois. The CBRC in Hines, Il is the oldest inpatient Blind Rehabilitation Center, in operation since 1948. There is a total of 13 CBRCs – twelve in the contiguous United States, and one in Puerto Rico. Search for specific locations by looking on the Internet for "VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers and locations." Patients move into small apartments at the facility and receive education on ways to advance life skills, learn new tasks, and get to experience technology that fits their individual needs.

Sam and I coordinated the interview for a timeslot after he received the shipment of his new items of technology so that I could observe how he uses the devices and what changes he noted in his life since using these new items. The first question I posed to Sam was, "What item, instruction, or piece of technology surprised you the most?" He responded that he had never expected that he would become an iPhone user! One thing that amazed him was the number of programs and features that could be adapted for audio access so that most functions of the iPhone are accessible to those with blindness and vision loss. Changing the settings on the phone can allow enlargement of the phone icons, making them easier to see for individuals with low vision.

The second device that impresses Sam was his Global Positioning System (GPS), technology that allows him and his Guide Dog, Winston, to independently go on long walks – even into new areas. They are able to find their way to shopping locations or social gatherings and then get home without having to walk with another person. The GPS device is a multi-function unit as it has the directional information and allows downloading and storing recorded books or stories. There are vast quantities of audio programs he can download to the device and listen to at his convenience.

The VA-CBRC also sent new computer equipment to Sam, and he notes the speed of the computer and improvement in search accuracy is remarkable. A high-quality microphone allows him to give verbal search commands, create a Word Document, or create an email. Sam states that email does not interest him as he prefers to communicate with people in person or via the phone.

Another feature of the iPhone is a program that allows him to hold the phone in front of a label, and the program reads the label and any other information on the screen. This feature also works for any print material. He was able to hear the details from magazine articles or advertisements. Sam states that this technology helps him be self-sufficient in the kitchen, as well as the rest of the house when his wife is not home.



Though Sam is more impressed with the freedom offered by the iPhone and GPS Device, one of the other incredible items he received is an OrCam MyEye – this is viewable in the photo at the top of the post. His glasses have a high-tech camera that clips onto the frames. This camera has a wire that connects to an earpiece and a description or audio “reading” of the material he faces transmits through the earpiece to Sam. He has been able to wear these to church and greet people as they approach him as he can label and save photos with names of the individuals. The OrCam recognizes the person’s image and relays their name via the earpiece. Though there are many audiobooks, these glasses can also be used to “read” or listen to books that the individual “views” with the OrCam MyEye Glasses and Camera rather than having to track down a recorded copy.

One of the most exciting findings of Sam’s tech-upgrade is that he is now an incredibly mobile, tech-connected, and busy individual since receiving the new accessible items that allow him to accomplish activities to which many able-bodied individuals don’t give a second thought. I interviewed him over a year ago, and it took me over six months to obtain his signature for the photo release! He was going to use a signature card for the process (that is a plastic or firm cardboard card, the size of a credit card, with a small strip carved out of the card). The open area allows those with blindness or vision loss to identify where they are to sign when it is over the signature line. I also showed him the method of folding the paper on the signature line and signing on the fold. He notes that he likes this option if he should happen to forget his signature card.

Part of the delay in completion and posting the article is secondary to Sam and his wife, Lora, being involved in Rendezvous Events every Spring, Summer, and Fall. Rendezvous is a reenactment group where attendees dress in period costume, from the 1840s, and use the same cooking and lifestyle processes of the time. He does some blacksmith and welding work for these events and makes fire-starter pipes that allow a person to easily stoke a fire by blowing through a tube to which he adds decorative metal pieces. The reenactment sounds exciting, and it would be fun to take part in one. Sam is no longer a homebody, and it was quite difficult to catch up with him! He has also lost a considerable amount of weight due to increases in physical activity since the photo was taken.

Resources:

1. OrCam: “New Lease on Sight: Glasses for the Blind,” June 1, 2017, <https://www.orcam.com/en/article/new-lease-sight-glasses-blind-see/>
2. Photo Credit for picture of Sam Foust: Image obtained by his wife, Lora Foust. Sam and Laura authorized its use for this Blog Post.
3. Photo of the Fire Pipe Sam created was taken by me, Bonnie J. Bartos PA-C, MHP, CDE. I authorize its use for this Blog Post.

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