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Device lets man, blind since birth, hear the sights of sunset

By Brian Feldman
Special Correspondent
Posted April 26 2004

Blind since birth, Adam Shaible now sees with his ears.

Outfitted with a tiny off-the-shelf camera and stereo headphones, Shaible sees images through a laptop computer that translate moving images into a real-time symphony of sounds. His brain does the rest.

- Email story
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Since November 2002, he has trained himself to translate the symphony of sounds into images so finite, he can tell if a person's hair is streaked.

"It's not the same as seeing as others do," said Shaible, 37, of Pompano Beach. "Being blind from birth, I'm still trying to get a grasp on things,

recognize them. I want to know what everything looks like."

He heard his first sunrise on Easter Sunday at St. Martin-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church in Pompano Beach. To the casual observer, he looked to the east wearing his dark glasses. As the sun began to slowly rise over the horizon, he heard a cacophony of low rumbling tones. The sounds were soft at first and then grew louder, more melodic and more intense.

"The tones I heard on Easter were soft melodies," he wrote in an e-mail. "When the sun came up more, the melodies became louder. You might say the orchestra was warming up for the big concert and then they played their hearts out."

Shaible is a few semesters away from a master's degree in psychology counseling at Trinity International University in Miami. He had to take two years off from his studies to deal with a serious bout of asthma, now under control. He is married to Denise, 47, who will get her master's in psychology from Trinity on May 8.

He admits to being a computer whiz, and found the device surfing the Internet. A research physicist at Philips Research in the Netherlands produced the first working prototype in 1998 of the "vOICe system." The three middle letters stand for "Oh, I See."

Once per second, the laptop in his backpack scans the picture from the camera, according to the vOICe Web site. Going from left to right, it analyzes one tiny bit of information or pixel, one

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column at a time. Each pixel in a column produces a wave whose frequency indicates its position; the highest frequencies are at the top. Amplitude, or intensity of the sound, is based on the brightness of the pixel on a 16-tone gray scale. The brightest pixels produce waves with the highest peaks; black pixels, assigned amplitudes of zero, produce no waves.

"This has given me a new birth," Shaible said. "I can see now and have a chance to learn to live all over again. I see the world in a different way and really appreciate it. I can see the sunrise and things like that, and do simple tasks. I like to look at Ruffles potato chips or my coffee. I really can appreciate it."

Shaible revels in the fun part of seeing -- flying a plane using an on-line simulator.

"I don't know what the ultimate goals of the physicists are in helping people see," he said. "I know what mine is. Either with this device or something like it, I want to drive a three-wheel electric scooter with my wife on the back. She can't walk much with her diabetes and bad back. I just want to be able to drive from my house to the convenience store. Not much, just neighborhood travel."

To learn more about vOICE, and to learn if you can see with sound, go to www.seeingwithsound.com

Do you have a recent story of hope? Have you overcome adversity in raising a family, been involved in a rescue or beaten the odds medically? Contact Steve Plunkett at splunkett@sun-sentinel.com or 954-356-4775.

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