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Able to Help

Torrance-based company helps the disabled put technology to work for their everyday tasks.

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Staff Writer

Marine Sgt. Kenneth Haley speaks haltingly over the phone, stopping often in midsentence to search for words to explain why he has difficulty talking.

Haley, who is based at Camp Pendleton outside of San Diego, was injured five separate times during two tours of duty in Iraq. The last incident ended his Middle East stint and sent him into a life of uncertainty.

On June 3, 2006, Haley was on a routine patrol outside the Iraqi city of Fallujah when his Humvee was hit by a roadside bomb that left him dazed.

"I got out to see if I could find out who did it," Haley recalled. "And that's when I got shot in the chest."

The bullet broke two of his ribs. His body armor kept the projectile from penetrating his chest, but the bullet's fragments lodged in his left shoulder.

A few weeks later, Haley left Iraq still in a daze - with a traumatic brain injury, post-concussive syndrome and severe post-traumatic stress disorder.

As a result, Haley, 26, must take prescribed narcotics to deal with constant excruciating headaches. He also suffers from memory problems and difficulty concentrating that affect everyday tasks.

However, a Torrance company is helping Haley improve the quality of his life and increase prospects for future work.

Believe Ability helps injured or otherwise challenged people learn to work with devices that enhance their abilities, a field known as assistive technology.

This year, a Department of Defense agency hired Believe Ability to train Haley and nearly a dozen other injured service members stationed at Camp Pendleton.

A Believe Ability therapist has been training Haley on several devices including a penlike contraption that gives an instant definition for a written word it passes over, and a system that puts his spoken words onto a computer screen.

"It takes you so long to do things on the computer. The support they've given me has really helped me make things faster," Haley said. "Before, I didn't really think I'd be able to do anything. At least, now I know I can go back to school."

While not a cure-all, assistive technology also gives the disabled an added sense of optimism, said Jason Hilkey, 37, the company's owner.

"A lot of (wounded service members) come back without hope, thinking, 'How am I going to live my life in this condition?'" Hilkey said. "The thing about assistive technology is that they see hope. They see that they can come back and still use a computer and keyboard or mouse. Or they use a computer that talks back to them because they can't see what's on the screen."

Jason Hilkey started Believe Ability in 2003 out of his Torrance house.

Most of Believe Ability's business involves assistive technology, although the firm also provides occupational and speech therapy. Today, the company has a staff of six, split between employees and contractors. Last year, the company served 103 children and adults.

Most recipients of the assistive technology training are disabled children. Believe Ability's clients include school districts, state agencies and families.

The company does not sell the technology, only. The process starts with a Believe Ability therapist assessing what a person needs. Then the therapist shows the subject where to buy the technology. The assessment process can take four to 10 hours.

"We figure out, with their disability, how they are going to use it," Hilkey said. "We try it out with them and we tell them where to buy it. And we set it up for them."

Hilkey entered the assistive technology field about eight years ago when the charity Goodwill hired him for the organization's program in Santa Ana.

After about three years at Goodwill, Hilkey started Believe Ability with the help of his wife, an occupational therapist specializing in the treatment of children.

"I always enjoyed being with people with disabilities and with the elderly," Hilkey said. "I

just feel very comfortable (with them). I feel I can see beyond their disabilities. We love doing this because it allows people to realize their full potential."

Blair Webb, a 16-year-old junior at Mira Costa High School, receives training from Hilkey on various technologies to help her overcome the effects of cerebral palsy. Blair's neurological condition limits her motor skills and makes speaking difficult.

Because of Hilkey's training, Blair can more easily read, write and even exchange e-mails.

For example, the high schooler has a computer that reads books and papers to her.

Blair also has an oversized computer keyboard with a key guard that makes accidentally hitting the wrong letter less likely.

Thanks to a special computer program, if she is typing a long word, such as "beautiful," writing the first few letters allows the program to guess the word she wants. The program gives Blair a list of options, and she picks the word she wants.

This limits the number of keystrokes Blair must make and speeds her typing.

Blair says she wants to be a writer, a profession that would be nearly impossible without assistive technology.

"I'm writing a story about two girls and what they go through," Blair explained.

Yet, the benefits of assistive technology can be limited depending on a person's disability or injury, Hilkey said. For example, some people with traumatic brain injury may suffer emotional problems that are beyond the scope of assistive technology.

"Assistive technology can make a difference with some of them, but not all of them," Hilkey said. "For the wounded service member who has a short temper, assistive technology can't do much for them."

For Sgt. Haley, the future is uncertain despite his new technologies. He plans to retire from the Marines in about two months with a \$1,000 monthly stipend.

He hopes to take some classes and possibly find some job that allows him to work at home.

Haley says he expects to have trouble finding work because prospective employers may be leery about hiring a person on narcotics, even if the drugs are simply to deaden his headaches.

"There's not much I can do with my headaches," Haley said.

BUSINESS

WATCH

Company: Believe Ability

Location: Torrance

Owner: Jason Hilkey

Founded: 2003

Services: assistive technology, such as voice recognition software; specialized computers; occupational, speech therapies

Revenues: Gross revenues increased 31 percent in 2006 over the previous year.

Information: www.believeability.com; 310-295-1024

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