

John Visicaro: Making an Impact

by Jonathan Jaffe

In the fall of 2005, John Visicaro had a decision to make. To earn his graduate degree in information systems from the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT), he had to work on a ground-breaking technology project.

Visicaro had options; there are plenty of projects in the cutting-edge world of technology. But the 43-year-old Union Township man wanted to work on technology that truly made an impact.

He found Marilyn Tremaine, Ph.D., who was chairperson of the university's information department. She was working with a talented team of students designing a special computer program to allow people who are blind and visually impaired to surf the Internet.

Such a concept intrigued Visicaro, who was aware that the Internet is notoriously limiting to people with vision problems, especially those who also suffer from other conditions, such as diabetes and Parkinson's disease.

"I couldn't think of a more worthwhile project," he said. "It

gave me the opportunity to learn the programming skills I needed."

While there are several software packages that make the Internet more accessible, the main challenge lies in the fact that HTML, which is a computer code, is not standardized. That means it is nearly impossible to make the entire Internet available to everyone, no matter the disability.

In November 2005, Visicaro began working with the team on the development of a tactile/audio interface that allows users to listen to online newspaper articles through their computer.

Months after he received his graduate degree, he was still volunteering with the group to fine tune the computer program, known as "AudioBrowser." (A version is available free of charge to anyone

on the Internet at www.AudioBrowser.org)

At the time of this interview, Visicaro noted that all members of the high-tech group were serving as volunteers. They all recognized how significantly this technology could directly enhance the lives of people who are blind.

"To complete my degree, I really wanted to work on a research project that can help make people's lives easier," said Visicaro, who had Freidriech's Aphasia, a neurological disorder that hinders language skills. "We are still fine tuning the computer program and hope people will download the software, try it out and let us know what they think."

While he downplays his role in developing AudioBrowser, there is no argument that Visicaro was a driving force. Through his mastery of computer programming, he was able to create software that makes it possible for blind people to read *The New York Times* through AudioBrowser.

Visicaro was able to take articles from the newspaper, convert them to a speech format and broadcast them via computer speakers.

Users of the program just need to know the location of a few keys

on the keyboard. From these keys, and through audio prompts, users can easily navigate through the different sections of the newspaper. A clear, friendly voice emits from the computer, reading any articles of interest to the user.

Users can also change the speed of the text being read, the volume and other features at the touch of a key. They do not need to memorize specific keystrokes. When a key is pressed, the feature for that key is

would be a completely different existence," said Lutz, who was pursuing a doctoral degree in information systems at NJIT. "Blind users on the computer don't have the same opportunity I have to consume information from the Internet. Through AudioBrowser, I can help them, which is a very rewarding experience."

Visicaro noted there is no other product on the market like AudioBrowser, which he said can

motivated to learn these systems. In contrast, AudioBrowser can be easily accessed and used.

(The group hopes to mass market AudioBrowser at a reasonable price.)

David Denotaris, a statewide manager for the New Jersey Commission for the Blind in Newark, describes AudioBrowser as "neat technology," although it is limiting in its present form because it can not access many web pages.

Denotaris, who is blind, says he has sampled a number of other technologies that are designed to help blind people access the Internet. The device he commonly uses includes Braille and an audio speaker.

He questions the need for AudioBrowser.

"As a blind person who uses the Internet for research and to purchase merchandise, I don't want to have to learn how to use another gadget,"

Denotaris says. "In my life, I already have a color detector, a note taker, a GPS device and a bar code reader that can tell me the contents of a jar in the supermarket."

Tests continue on AudioBrowser. The team is building out the system to ensure the technology is maximized, and encourages users to download the software to try it out. The group also plans to add navigation software and to make a PDA version, in which users can access such useful items as calendars, address books, music and to-do lists.

The team has received strong encouragement from the National Federation for the Blind, the New Jersey Commission for the Blind and several local Lions Club Organizations. **P&F**

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spoken to the user as he/she hits it.

"If you want to access the newspaper, you would just turn AudioBrowser on and hit a key that says 'Read New York Times'," Visicaro said. "You would then be able to zoom in and out of each article. You would be able to listen to podcasts. You can use the keyboard's arrow keys to hit the different features. It is great technology that can help a lot of people."

Bob Lutz of Scotch Plains, who also was a volunteer on the AudioBrowser team, said it had been a great opportunity to work with evolving technologies, as well as to help people who have vision problems.

"My life without the Internet

also access such websites such as www.usatoday.com and www.yankees.com. He said the program comes with a free voice, but it sounds digitized. For about \$300 audio equipment can be purchased that features a polite, friendly human voice

Visicaro noted that any technology that accommodates people with disabilities tends to be expensive, beginning at about \$900, sold by such companies as Humanware and Freedom Scientific. These devices, he said, are relatively complex and require the user to memorize commands. Also, some of the systems need users to be able to write and read Braille. Visicaro said blind individuals have had to be highly

“He did more than a person without a disability”

Following the development of the previous article, John Visicaro died on January 21 at Care One in Morristown after a long bout with Friedreich's Aphasia. He was 43.

“What John accomplished with a disability was amazing,” said his mother, Marietta Visicaro. “He did more than a person without a disability. He instilled in everyone he met that anything is possible.”

Mrs. Visicaro said her son moved back to the family home in Union Township nine years ago after his disability made it impossible for him to continue to live on his own. Mrs. Visicaro and her husband, John, renovated their home to accommodate his specific needs.

“It was just so good to hear him every morning say ‘Good morning, Mom’,” Visicaro recalled. “I miss him being here. My husband and I are having a very tough time with all of this.”

Born in Newark, Visicaro was an environmental chemist for 12 years, an adjunct professor at Seton Hall University for two years, and webmaster and designer for the New Jersey Institute of Technology in Newark for five years.

A 1988 graduate of Kean University in Union, Visicaro received a master's degree in environmental chemistry from Seton Hall University in 1990 and a second master's degree from the New Jersey Institute of Tech-

nology in computer science in 2006.

Mrs. Visicaro said one of her son's proudest moments was developing a website for the Handicapped Scuba Association, based in San Clemente, Ca., a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the physical and social well-being of people with



John Visicaro (seated) and his family and friends

disabilities though scuba diving.

Visicaro was a certified handicapped scuba diver and used equipment customized to accommodate his disability. He frequently traveled to some of the world's most exotic locations, often diving with others who had disabilities.

“John was very independent,” said Elizabeth Kocot, a friend and clinical social worker with the state Division of Medical Assistance and Health Services. “John had a customized van with a ramp for his wheelchair that brought him right to the driver's seat. He was then able to drive with manual controls.”

Kocot described Visicaro as the

“motivating factor” behind the development of AudioBrowser, the technology he helped devise that allows users to listen to online newspaper articles through their computer. She said Visicaro spent the last months of his life promoting the technology and seeking funding for its advancement.

“He was looking for an organization that could fund AudioBrowser and mass produce it,” she said. “John wanted as many people as possible to benefit from the technology.”

Mrs. Visicaro said her son was very focused on his family, noting his 17-year-old nephew, Daniel LoBrace, delivered the eulogy at his Mass. “Danny seems to be following in John's accomplished footsteps,” Mrs. Visicaro said. “It was a wonderful eulogy, a real tribute to all John has accomplished in his life.”

Besides his mother and father, surviving are two sisters, Nancy LoBrace and her husband, Frank, and Grace Smith and her husband, E. Paul Smith. He was the uncle of Daniel, Jenna, Cristina LoBrace and Julia and Talia Smith.

Donations in John Visicaro's name can be made to the Family Reach Foundation, 25 Homer St., Parsippany, N.J. 07054. The non-profit group provides support and financial relief to families fighting pediatric cancers and other life-threatening diseases.

—Jonathan Jaffe

Her train still runs

Caris Corfman, a talented actress died at age 51 in January after a stroke.

Corfman was born in Boston and grew up in upstate New York and Bethesda, Md. She graduated from Florida State University and then earned a masters degree in fine arts from Yale Drama School. The theatrical bug bit Corfman at an early age. She began performing (with her friend and later collaborator Bratford Watkins) in "Brigadoon," "Carousel," and other musicals in high school.

Upon graduating from Yale, she burst onto the New York drama scene in the 1980's, creating the role of Katarina Cavaalleri in the original Broadway production of "Amadeus." Corfman took over the lead role of Constanze Weber when Jane Seymour left the cast.

After "Amadeus," a whirlwind of theatrical, movie and TV roles followed for Corfman—from the Williamstown Theatre Festival to the movie "Funny Farm" (starring Chevy Chase) to the TV show "Law and Order."

Corfman's acting career ended when surgery to remove a benign brain tumor left her with a head injury. The section of her brain that controls short term memory and her pituitary gland were damaged.

Though she'd sustained a brain injury, Corfman hadn't lost her love of performing—from acting to dancing. "Do you fly in your dreams?" Corfman asked me, when I spoke with her at the

Olney Theatre in Olney, Md. She added, "That's what dancing is like for me! I love dancing!" The actress was eager to perform to whatever extent she could, given the limitations created by her head injury.

Corfman decided to work with Watkins to create and perform a one-woman show "Caris' Peace" about living and performing with a brain injury. She performed the 45-minute show at the Olney, the Flea Theater in New York and in Philadelphia. In these productions, Corfman recited from memory speeches from plays she's per-



Caris Corfman

formed decades ago, but read from cue cards the lines that she and Watkins had recently written.

Corfman dealt forthrightly with her disability and public attitudes to it in her show. Breaking "the fourth wall" between audience and performer, she would ask people in the front row to tell her their names, reported David Carr of "The New York Times. Then, Corfman would apologetically inform them that she

would forget their names by the end of the performance.

She loved performing again, Corfman told me. "Some well-known actors came to the performance (at the Olney Theatre) and my high school boyfriend came, too," she said. What Corfman didn't like, she said, was the condescending attitude that so many people have toward people with cognitive disabilities.

The performer wrote down in her notebook and journal what pills she took, when she ate, who she saw and what ideas she had. This reminded her, Corfman told me, that though she had a brain injury, she had a life. Most of all, Corfman wanted me to understand that though she had no short term memory, she was an adult, capable of living her own life.

During our interview, Corfman gave me a copy of the script of "Caris' Peace." In the show, the performer spoke for many people who have sustained cognitive disabilities, when she declared, "I miss freedom...I went from being independent to helpless. Suddenly, I am being told what to do and with whom. I have no choice in matters. Others make choices for me. I am treated like a misbehaving child, which ignites my anger and frustrates me more."

Corfman emphasized what she wanted not only me but the world to know about herself. Speaking of her life, she said, "This train still runs!"

—Kathi Wolfe