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BUSINESS

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TRENDESETTER

Ensuring their independence

Jupiter firm develops technology to help people with ALS.

By Jeff Ostrowski

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JUPITER — Steve Saling can't walk, chew or speak. Afflicted with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the 45-year-old former architect said his ALS diagnosis doomed him to become "very dependent."

But thanks to technology developed by a Jupiter entrepreneur, Saling has regained some modest control over his life. Saling lives at a Boston-area nursing home for ALS patients, and he uses a device made by PEAC Automation Systems to control the TV, thermostat, lights, doors and blinds in his room.

The system uses a camera with an eye-tracker that lets Saling control his computer as if he were moving a mouse. He handles a variety of tasks, such as moving his wheelchair and summoning the elevator to his floor.

"It gives me back my life and puts me in charge," Saling said by email.

The automation system was installed by Ron Bessems of Jupiter. A native of the Netherlands, Bessems earned a master's degree in physics and got his start in business designing home-automation systems.

In recent years, Bessems turned his attention to adapting automation systems for people with disabilities. Aside from the installation at the 20-patient nursing home where Saling lives, Bessems also has sold a system to Steve Gleason, a former player for the New Orleans Saints who lives in Louisiana.

"Anything around his house he can control with his eyes," Bessems said. "Stuff we take for granted, he can do now."

Bessems said using eye movement to control a computer is just a start. The next step, he said, is to use brain-wave readers.

System uses eye movement to control user's computer.



With Ron Bessems' PEAC system, people with ALS and MS can use their eyes to control their televisions, thermostats, lights, doors and blinds in their homes.

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Mind-reading might not be in the cards, but sensors can tell if you're focusing on a particular object.

Bessems said health insurers don't cover the cost of his automation systems. Because each system is customized, he declined to quote prices.

Saling guessed that the system cost a total of \$400,000 for the 20 patients at his

nursing home — a sum he called a small price to pay.

"PEAC has changed my life," Saling said. "It is 99.9 percent reliable and gives me a level of independence and freedom that is unequaled for people like me anywhere on Earth."

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