

Silicon Valley Business Journal

January 2, 2004

Life enhancement made possible by non-chip technology

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Math and science teacher Earlin Patterson uses a wish-bone shaped pen to grade papers for his students at Bowditch Middle School in Foster City. He writes a sentence or two on each of 60 papers in one sitting and, thanks to the new pen, not only have his fingertips stopped aching, his penmanship has improved.

When it comes to technological advances, all that glitters is not necessarily silicon -- even in Silicon Valley. Technology that's not embedded with microprocessors, electronics or other digital components can just as significantly offer new and improved approaches to old tasks.

Pacifica-based Pacific Writing Instruments' PenAgain has begun to change the way some people write.

The Writing Instruments Manufacturers Association's annual U.S. Writing Instruments Industry Report -- a sort of state-of-the-industry address -- says ergonomics will play the dominant role in writing instrument design trends, and it singles out PenAgain as the trendsetter.

Pens and pencils have been shaped like a straight stick since sticks were used to write in the sand. PenAgain, in the writing position, looks like a wishbone at the end of a sleek little pen-tipped rocket. The wishbone end wraps around the index finger, which rests on the pen's recessed support area. That allows all three fingers to hold and power the pen, instead of the pen resting on the middle finger and being gripped by the thumb and index finger.

Turned upside down and clipped in a shirt pocket (the tip conveniently retracts the pen's point), PenAgain looks like an unfinished stick drawing of a human with only a torso and legs.

PenAgain's design is actually derived from a miniature toy robot created during a school discipline session 15 years ago. Palo Alto High student Colin Roche's frequent tardiness fatefully landed him in detention for the first time where he discovered the pen, again.

"My dad is a physicist so we've always tinkered with things. I always got writer's cramp, my handwriting was bad and I had bought this little toy robot at the flea market," Mr. Roche says. "When I turned it upside down the legs made a crutch for my hand. I borrowed a cigarette lighter and mocked up the idea."

For the next decade and a half, Mr. Roche worked with engineer Bobby Ronsse creating a new writing tool named not as a rediscovery, but for the reaction to Mr. Roche's irritatingly incessant discussions about his idea. ("What? That pen again?" friends would say.)

Users say the design takes the pressure off fingertips and helps avoid the callus pen and pencil users often develop. PenAgain also creates an ergonomic opportunity to write with arm motion rather than just finger motion, but it does take some time to unlearn old writing habits.....

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