

PianoDisc, Stanford help amputee make music again

Palo Alto, CA- Professional pianist Roger Cowger had just finished a piano set when---without warning---he collapsed from cardiac arrest. Three months later, he awoke from a coma to discover that one of his legs had been amputated as a result of blood clotting.

9/10/2002

Press Release

from PianoDisc

"After I found out what had happened to me, my first thought was, 'How will I be able to get around?'" recalls Cowger. "My next thought was, 'How will I be able to play the piano again?'"

Even when Cowger lost the battle to keep his other leg, he didn't lose hope that, one day, he would once again create music on a piano. "I began doing research to find out if there was a way for me to continue playing the piano," says Cowger, "but none of the doctors or therapists were willing to help."

Despite his frustration, Cowger continued to inquire about piano playing for people with disabilities. And that's when he heard about community projects conducted by students in the Mechanical Engineering Design Division at Stanford University.

"When I heard about these projects, it sounded like a terrific idea," says Cowger. "And when I found out that I had been selected by a team of students, I was thrilled."

Although they had a short amount of time and a limited budget, engineering students Jean-Paul Labrosse, Jessica Chapman, Patricio Delgado and Jodie Prud'homme set out to design a portable system capable of activating the sustain pedal on any piano.

The student team began researching the Internet for piano systems designed for people with similar disabilities and found a link to PianoDisc, one of the world's leading manufacturers of computerized player systems for acoustic pianos. Not long before, PianoDisc had designed the Pedal Adapter System for a pianist who had lost the use of her legs in a near-fatal car accident.

"PianoDisc's technical department was really helpful and supportive," says Labrosse. "They understood that we were pressed for time and tried to help us as much as possible."

Then the technical department put the student in touch with PianoDisc' executive vice president Tom Lagomarsino, who offered to donate several thousand dollars worth of equipment for use in the project.

"We know from experience how important music making is to pianists who have lost the ability to play," says Lagomarsino. "This was a really worthwhile project that we wanted to support."

"Roger was on a really tight budget and would never have been able to pay for all of the equipment PianoDisc donated (a pedal solenoid, mounting system, control circuitry and power supply). They were really wonderful and really made the project a big success," recalls Labrosse.

After several weeks of testing in the Stanford lab, and in Cowger's Sunnyvale home, the student designers and Cowger demonstrated the innovative project at Stanford's annual design expo.

"It was wonderful to hear Roger play for the first time," recalls Labrosse. "You could tell by the look on his face how much it meant to him. It was a great moment for us all."

According to Cowger, who is playing the piano again on a daily basis, it is difficult to put into words how the Stanford student and PianoDisc have changed his life: "Playing the piano has always been a passion for me and to have it taken away was heartbreaking. It's really remarkable that I'm able to play again and I'm very grateful to Stanford University and PianoDisc for making it possible."

To learn more about the Stanford project, call Jean-Paul Labrosse at (650) 906-1029. Learn more about the PianoDisc Pedal Adapter System by calling Tom Lagomarsino at (916) 567-9999.

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