

Retired physics professor makes tablet computer tool to benefit Amherst seniors

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Tuesday, April 24, 2012



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KEVIN GUTTING

Joel Gordon, an Amherst College professor emeritus of physics, has made a stylus for use on iPads and similar touch screen devices. He is selling them for \$5 each to benefit the Amherst Senior Center.

AMHERST - A few months ago, Joel Gordon, a professor emeritus of physics at Amherst College, had little familiarity with iPads, iPhones and other electronic devices with touch screens.

But now Gordon, a member of the town's Council on Aging, is making stylus devices for use with tablet computers and smartphones and selling them for \$5, a fraction of their market price. All proceeds benefit the Amherst Senior Center, he said.

Sitting in his brightly lit office in the Merrill Science Building, Gordon, 81, explained that his daughter-in-law, who lives in Hong Kong, bought him an iPad as a gift late last year. "She thought I couldn't survive without one," he said.

And, in fact, he has found it useful.

"It's an easy way to get on the Net and get information," he said.

The instructions for installing Microsoft Office on his new tablet suggested purchasing a stylus to make it easier to type on the keypad. When Gordon began researching that suggestion, though, he discovered that the better ones cost from \$15 to \$50.

"I thought that seemed a lot of money, and I thought that if they do work, I can make one myself," Gordon said.

Using his knowledge of the technology involved in touch screens, Gordon set to work.

He knew that the stylus had to be able to conduct electricity between a person's hand and the touch screen. But it couldn't conduct too much electricity, because that could cause damage.

He experimented by pulling a wire through the empty casing of a plastic pen. He later determined that a metal tube would provide better conductivity, but that the metal shouldn't touch the screen directly. A campus electronics technician suggested he try inserting antistatic foam as a buffer. That seemed to do the trick.

Working in his office at Amherst College, Gordon cuts long strips of quarter-inch-thick stainless steel tubing into 5-inch lengths using a hand-held cutter. He then uses a heat gun to apply heat-shrinkable tubing at either end to blunt the sharp edges.

He cuts a large sheet of three-eighths-inch-thick antistatic foam into pieces that he wedges inside the metal tube.

He also fashions a storage cylinder for the stylus out of celluloid.

He then puts each stylus into a small sandwich bag, along with an instruction sheet that reads, "The stylus is useful when typing emails, memos or text messages, or when entering a user name and password. Use of the stylus can also improve your score when playing your favorite games."

The sheet also thanks people for their donations to support the Senior Center.

Screen saver

Gordon says he doesn't know how much it costs him to make each stylus. He has spent less than \$200 on materials, which he buys in bulk, and expects to be able to produce another 60 with the supplies he has on hand. He spent about eight hours one recent weekend making and packaging about a dozen of the 15 or so he has produced so far.

Gordon has promoted his stylus in a couple of ways. He sold three at a recent Council on Aging meeting. He has also provided Amherst College's desktop computing services department with a supply.

Margaret Stancer, the department's director, said staff members are trying them.

"They're interesting, they're very inexpensive, and if they work as well as the more expensive items you can buy then we could say to people they are a good deal and it goes for a good cause, as well," Stancer said.

Gordon is confident that his stylus will measure up.

"It does really save the screen from getting marked up with fingerprints," he said.

Gordon, who admits he is a bad typist, said using the stylus makes that job easier for him. He said his wife, Pamela Gordon, plays Sudoku with the stylus.

Barbara Slovin, chairwoman of the Friends of the Amherst Senior Center, was among the first to buy Gordon's creation and said it compares favorably to commercial models.

"It functions nicely," Slovin said. "He did a fabulous job."

Gordon joked that his product could be an inspiration.

"I could represent myself as a new generation of entrepreneurs," he said.

2. <http://www.gazettenet.com/files/images/20120423-231457-pic-412425446.display.jpg>