

# Hearing society makes life easier for deaf

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Staff Writer

It's the middle of the night.

A crackle from behind the stove turns out to be the beginning of an electrical fire. The smoke wafts toward the fire alarm causing the device to wail in an effort to alert everyone in the house to promptly escape.

Most feel confident the alarm would wake them from a dead sleep, but what if you couldn't hear the alarm?

This is one challenge among many the deaf and hard of hearing face every day.

Gilbert Lillie, Newmarket resident and support services counsellor with the York Region Canadian Hearing Society, was born deaf and knows what it is like to have difficulty with everyday tasks.

*'When the hearing got cellphones, we were very jealous.*

*But now we have our pagers, it puts us on par with the regular world.'*

"If the phone rings or someone knocks on the door, I don't know they are there," he signed as Sandra Fox, his interpreter, translated.

In the past, there was no accessibility or technological devices for the deaf.

His mother, who is also deaf, used to sleep with her hand on his chest to feel the vibration of his cries as an infant.

But technology has come a long way to help make the deaf and hard of hearing live more independent lives.

Technical devices, such as Alert Masters, have fire alarms hardwired into the home which flash an extremely bright strobe light when activated and a pager to be clipped on a belt that vibrates and flashes to indicate if the phone or doorbell is ringing or if your infant is crying, alerting the person wearing it has made living solo possible for those with a hearing impairment.

Text telephones, known as TTY's, where the phone receiver is set on top or plugged into the device that translates voice into text and allows the user to type a response on the keyboard, have gone from the size of a large typewriter to the size of a laptop, which can be easily transported in a small bag or purse.

However, with American Sign Language being

the deaf's first language and English being their second, many miscommunications happen in the translation process.

To eliminate these types of errors, D-Link has come out with a video phone that hooks into the television so people can sign to each other without having to think of the correct English word to type to communicate.

Now, the TTY is becoming outdated as e-mail has gained popularity and text pagers have become the new addiction of users much like the BlackBerry.

"When the hearing got cellphones we were very jealous," Mr. Lillie said with a laugh. "But now we have our pagers, it puts us on par with the regular world."

But even with the development of this technology, there is still a long way to go when it comes to providing accessibility to this portion of the population. Although home life has improved dramatically, tasks that need to be done outside the home still present barriers.

"Accessibility isn't a choice it's a must," he said. "It's a human right."

Although these devices exist, few businesses, organizations and government services are providing them to their clients, employees or customers to improve communication, York Region Canadian Hearing Society hearing care counsellor Noor Ratansi-Iamurri said.

"If you walk into the hospital with a sick child or other emergencies, how do you communicate with nurses and doctors?" she said. "We want to stress these devices are open to businesses, employers, hospitals and more so they can show they are committed to being assessable for all."

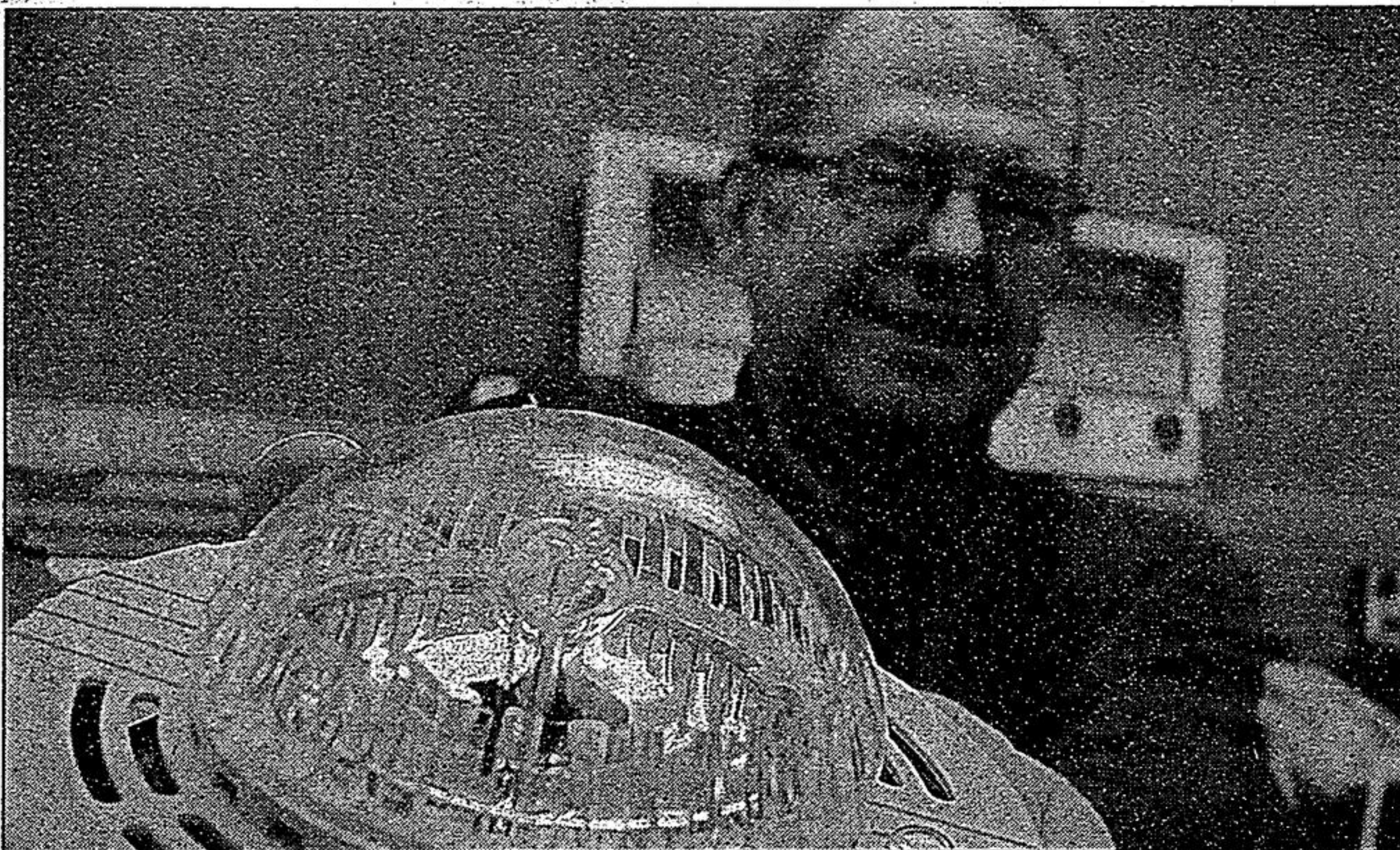
The public may not think about these barriers since most can hear, but for an aging population more than 50 per cent of people older than 65 have some hearing loss making devices for sound amplification a must to ensure their quality of living.

Keswick has the only library in the region with a TTY public phone.

Mobility Transit has TTY services and the organization is working closely with emergency services to ensure 9-1-1 services are fully accessible.

"We have the tools, so now we have to get people to provide these services to employees and the public who need them," she said.

For more information, call 905-715-7511, TTY: 905-898-6646 or go to [www.chs.ca](http://www.chs.ca)



STAFF PHOTO/MIKE BARRETT

Gilbert Lillie, general support services counsellor for the Canadian Hearing Society York Region, shows off a visual fire alarm, just one of the many technical devices for deaf and hard of hearing citizens offered at the new Communication Devices and Accessibility Centre.

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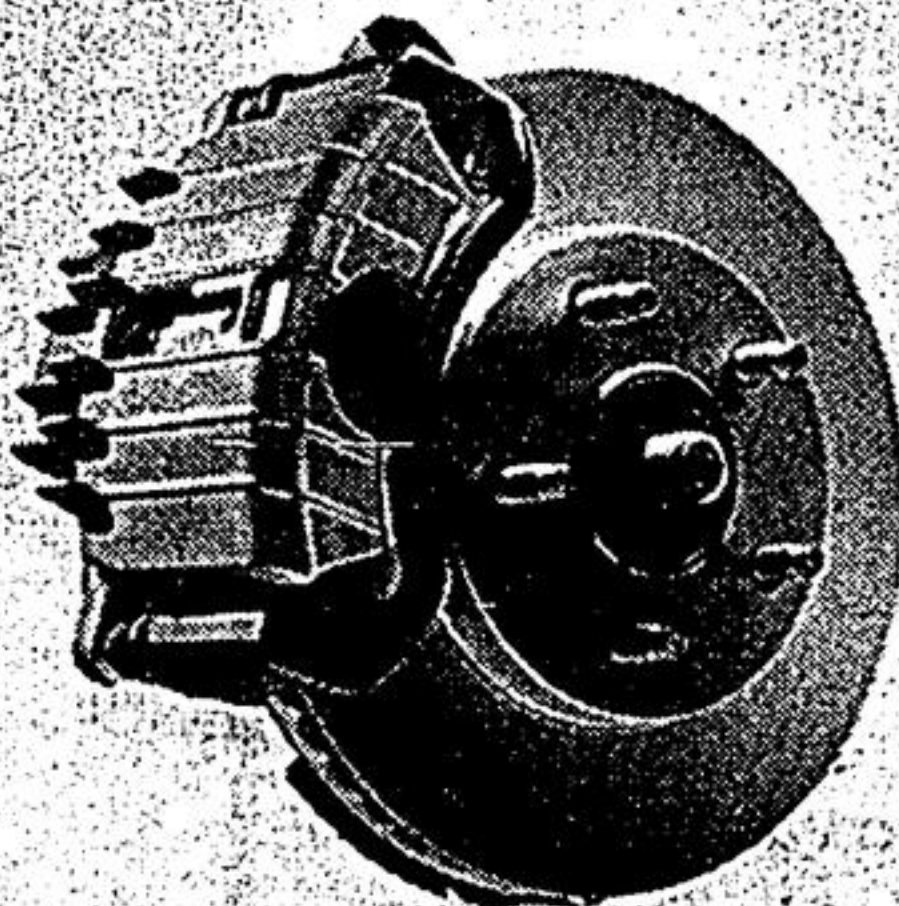
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