

Artificial speech device gives cancer survivor new hope

By Sara Michael
Examiner Staff Writer

With his wife's seemingly endless stream of cheery chatter, it's a wonder Gilbert Gray can ever get a word in edgewise.

But now with the click of a few key strokes, he can at least try.

"It was like seeing a flower bloom," Joan Gray said of her husband as he typed feverishly on a compact keyboard, waiting to hit the "speak" key on his new artificial speech device.

Gray, 58, a retired Army staff sergeant, had his larynx and tongue removed after a painful bout of throat cancer and 40 chemotherapy and radiation treatments.

For more than two years, the once talkative man who managed a Ford dealership after 20 years in the military was left without speech, taste or smell.

He was resigned to scribbling notes on paper — always a step behind in the conversation — and his wife wound up filling the empty air with her own words. He would leave the room during family dinners, relying on a feeding tube for his meals.

Gilbert Gray retreated, becoming increasingly depressed and isolated. His wife started turning down invitations and eventually people stopped

asking. He could see the effect he was having on his family and was close to leaving them.

"I was about at the end of my rope," Gilbert Gray, grinning broadly, said in the stoic digitized voice projected from his artificial speech generator.

Last April, Gilbert Gray's doctor referred him to case managers at Johns Hopkins' US Family Health Plan, a Defense Department-sponsored insurance program that covers active-duty and retired military and their families.

"It was clear he was frustrated and very depressed," said nurse and case manager Kay Concha.

After much searching, Concha came across an assisted speech device often used by patients with cerebral palsy. The roughly \$4,000 machine, called a DynaWrite, was covered by the Grays' insurance.

Primary care doctors might not know about the device since it's only been used for cerebral palsy patients. But interested patients can reach out to the United Cerebral Palsy organization, said Pat Davis, a spokeswoman for the Hopkins' US Family Health Plan.

Gilbert Gray took to the machine immediately and today can almost keep up with his wife.

"You can't understand just what it means to say 'hi' to your

neighbor," Gray said through the machine.

"You feel like you can participate."

He can talk on the phone, help his granddaughter with her homework, and for the first time in years last Saturday, Gilbert Gray watched the Ravens game with his brother-in-law and friends.

Now, Gray wants others to know this device isn't just for people with cerebral palsy.

"We need to get thousands if people with this situation the same opportunity," Gilbert Gray said, tapping his machine and giving a thumbs up.

"I look forward to living,"
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KRISTINE BULLS/EXAMINER
Gilbert Gray, 58, had his larynx and tongue removed to treat throat cancer.



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