

People who are blind can now experience the world with Google Glass

By The Kansas City Star, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.03.17

Word Count **756**

Level **970L**



Although Google Glass never became a hit with consumers, it has found a purpose in adaptive technology for the blind. When connected to an agent in a different part of the country who can "see" for him through the glasses, Paul Mimms of Kansas City, North, can better navigate the world. Photo: Jill Toyoshiba/Kansas City Star/TNS

KANSAS CITY, Missouri — Paul Mimms is no stranger to using helpful technologies every day. Blind for more than 30 years, he lost sight in his left eye when he was 23 years old and serving in the Vietnam War. Years later, he lost sight in his right eye to an eye disease called glaucoma.

His "talking" bathroom scale tells him his weight. "It's not nice," he joked.

Mimms has diabetes, too. People with diabetes have too much sugar in their blood. The body needs sugar in the blood, but too much can be a bad thing. A talking blood-sugar meter tells him his blood sugar level. He also has a white cane and a talking laptop computer.

"Alexa, turn on 'Good Morning,'" he said, starting a command for Amazon's voice-activated home assistant speaker.

Immediately, the shades and curtains in his home open. End table lights click off. The assistant helps him control everything from his television to his garage and front doors. A talking price gun reads the bar codes on cans and bags of food, nutritional information, even recipes.

Google Glass And An App

So Mimms was hardly shy when a new company asked him to try a new pair of smart glasses. In fact, his are Google Glass, the same kind that failed to sell with customers in 2014. Now, these glasses help him to manage even better.

The glasses do not restore or sharpen sight. Instead, individuals wearing the glasses who are blind or visually impaired use an app to connect to an "agent," a live person located in the United States. The agent can "see" what the visually impaired user cannot see, so they can assist users via communication on the phone and earbud.

The company Aira, pronounced "Ira," began taking customers in 2016. Aira customers receive both the glasses and a certain number of minutes they can have with agents. They can purchase more time to talk to the agent from 100 minutes each month to an unlimited number.

"We've had users go hiking on trails, finding their paper in the morning. You name it, we'll do it," said Amy Bernal, Aira's vice president for customer experience.

The Glasses Will Continue To Evolve

The National Federation of the Blind is excited about the technology. Last year, it announced it was funding the business. The president of the federation, Mark Riccobono, joined Aira's board of advisers, which means he will get to help make decisions about the technology.

"We do like the technology. We believe that particularly as it continues to advance, it definitely is going to have a place in the lives of blind people," Chris Danielsen, the federation's spokesperson, said.

By "advance," Danielsen means the glasses' use of social media sites and artificial intelligence. Computer programs that can think on their own are examples of artificial intelligence. In addition to the app connecting users with an agent, it also connects to the users' social media sites and other sites like Google Maps.

The idea is that, even without an agent, blind users wearing the glasses would be able to understand where to go in an unfamiliar place. The technology would guide them to a destination. In the future, a user might use the photos of their contacts on their phone and software to guide them to a friend in a crowd.

Getting From One Point To Another

Mimms tested the technology as an early user. He has been using the glasses for more everyday reasons, such as going shopping.

At home recently, he used the glasses and an agent to read the cooking instructions on the back of a package of chicken tenders. The glasses and agent also help with him to get from place to place.

"Getting from point A to point B is one of the most difficult things we have to accomplish," Mimms said. In general, cellphone instructions that read aloud have been helping the visually impaired for

years. The cellphone can read directions and other information for the user.

Mimms said having the smart glasses and an agent is like having a guide to point out landmarks.

“One thing you can do is identify things along your path. You can discover things,” Mimms said.

It has been hard to go shopping and have to ask for help from an employee, he said. The lenses are helpful but they do not replace a cane or guide dog.

“Basically, it just greatly enhances one’s self-reliance or independence to do a wide variety of tasks.”

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the article shows Mimms' MAIN opinion about the glasses?
- (A) "We've had users go hiking on trails, finding their paper in the morning. You name it, we'll do it."
 - (B) "We do like the technology. We believe that particularly as it continues to advance, it definitely is going to have a place in the lives of blind people."
 - (C) "One thing you can do is identify things along your path. You can discover things."
 - (D) "Basically, it just greatly enhances one's self-reliance or independence to do a wide variety of tasks."

- 2 Read the inference below.

The glasses may someday provide blind users with complete freedom to navigate public places in the same way as people who can see.

Select the paragraph from the section "The Glasses Will Continue To Evolve" that supports this inference.

- 3 Which sentence introduces HOW Google Glass works in the article?
- (A) The assistant helps him control everything from his television to his garage and front doors.
 - (B) Instead, blind or visually impaired individuals who are wearing the glasses use an app to connect to an "agent," a live person located in the United States.
 - (C) In fact, his are Google Glass, the same kind that failed to sell with customers in 2014.
 - (D) In addition to the app connecting users with an agent, it also connects to the users' social media sites and other sites like Google Maps.
- 4 What is the MOST likely reason the author included information about other smart technologies in Mimms' home?
- (A) The author wanted to show how the glasses alone won't be enough to improve Mimms' life.
 - (B) The author thinks blind people should invest more money in these things instead of the smart glasses.
 - (C) The author is trying to show readers how technology has negatively influenced Mimms' life.
 - (D) The author wants to show how technology has improved other aspects of Mimms' life.