

Caltech grad may have invented eyeglasses of the future

By Nathan McIntire, Staff Writer
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Wearing and holding his invention Stephen Kurtin, a former Caltech graduate, is seen through an adjustable lens unit at TruFocals in Van Nuys Friday, August 7, 2009. TruFocals are prescription glasses, which can be focused at any distance all the way to reading and are being marketed to those that need multiple pairs of glasses or use bifocals or progressive lenses. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)

After obtaining more than 30 patents for multiple inventions, Caltech graduate Dr. Stephen Kurtin years ago decided to turn his visionary inclinations toward his own vision, or lack thereof.

The 64-year-old Kurtin has spent nearly four decades inventing technologies ranging from office equipment to word processors, and as he's aged, the deterioration of his own eyesight helped spawn his latest creation - eyeglasses that can manually switch focus at any distance, eliminating the need for bifocals and reading glasses.

"The idea of adjustable focus glasses is that you can literally change the focus to whatever you want, on demand," Kurtin said.

Dubbed TruFocals, Kurtin's innovative eyeglasses, which have a manual slider on the bridge allowing for instant shifting of focus near and far, hit the market two weeks ago. Their release solves a problem that has persisted for more than a century, Kurtin said.

"They're the Holy Grail for people who need vision correction," Kurtin said.

A graduate of M.I.T., Kurtin studied applied physics at Caltech, where he was a Howard Hughes Fellow. He graduated in 1971 and called his time at the school "a

really great experience."

Though Kurtin co-founded TruFocals in 2006, he and his team had spent the last 17 years trying to perfect glasses that enable focusing at a wide range of distances. The TruFocals mark his invention's 14th incarnation, and the first he was able to put on the market.

"The first few generations were not even wearable," he said.

The glasses feature two separate lenses. The front lens is a conventional lens made to a personal prescription. The rear lens is flexible to enable close and intermediate vision. Moving the "vision correction" slider back and forth allows users to focus sharply at any distance.

Kurtin is confident that as production ramps up for TruFocals, business will bustle. After all, his target customer pool is quite large.

About one-third of the population - "basically everybody over the age of 45," he said - suffers from presbyopia, a condition that causes the progressive loss of the the ability to focus on close objects.

"If, for some reason, you work on a farm, or you don't read, then you don't need these," he said.

TruFocals retail for \$895, and Kurtin says he's already sold hundreds of pairs. Only two optometrists in Los Angeles are currently authorized to sell the glasses, but Kurtin said his company is working to get many more on board.

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TruFocals prescription glasses on display at the company's Van Nuys office Friday, August 7, 2009. TruFocals can be focused at any distance all the way to reading and are being marketed to those that need multiple pairs of glasses or use bifocals or progressive lenses. (SGVN/Staff Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz)