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An Intellectual and Technological Odyssey from LeapPad to Smartpen and Beyond Lafayette's Jim Marggraff empowers people

By Sophie Braccini



Jim Marggraff with an Odyssey interactive globe and a Smartpen Photo Sophie Braccini

Like his red Tesla roaming the streets of Lafayette, Jim Marggraff is moving fast at the cutting edge of technology and intellectual challenge. The creator of the LeapPad and the Echo Smartpen could easily be mistaken for just an inventor, when in fact he is a humanist whose purpose is to empower his fellow human beings with technology.

If you ever meet Marggraff for a cup of coffee and a casual conversation, warm-up your neurons beforehand - his mind speeds along at a spectacular pace that could leave you breathless. When he talks about his passions and his business ventures, the Lafayette businessman will blow you away with his ideas and achievements in the complex world of the transformation of waves and signals into creative applications that work like magic.

Fresh out of MIT, Marggraff already believed that one idea can change the world. While some of his classmates thought of business or military applications for the technology they were working on, his first impulse was to create tools for average people, that no one thought could ever work, let alone be a commercial success.

One of his first ventures was the Odyssey interactive globe. "I was struck by the fact that we are so ignorant

about geography," he says, "so I created that tool, an atlas in the shape of a playful globe, storing millions of facts that are easily accessible by touching it." The globe compares populations and land areas between locations, it tells distances between points, it can calculate the length of geographic features such as rivers, and also contains cultural information. Removing the globe from its stand one is surprised to see that it is completely hollow: the information is transmitted wirelessly.

"The technology used for the globe is radio frequency that can pick up a touch with an accuracy of 1/8 of an inch where a non-conductive material like paper is tapped," says Marggraff, "so I thought, aha! we could take this and flatten it out and put a book on it and create an inexpensive tool to teach kids to read." That is how the LeapPad was invented. "At first people didn't get it," remembers Marggraff, "they said it would never work." Not surprisingly in hindsight, Leapfrog's doors opened and, with Marggraff on board, LeapPad became one of the most award-winning and successful toys of its time.

But Marggraff says he does not like on to hold on to his inventions past the first stages of commercialization. So he moved on to his next invention, the Smartpen. "I get my best ideas at 4:00 o'clock in the morning," says Marggraff who adds that he likes to go to bed with a problem - "I'll wake up at 4:00 with the solution."

He needed a tool to easily record his ideas, archive them and make them searchable. Those are some of the attributes of the Smartpen, a tool to free the imagination, as Marggraff puts it. "As people age they learn to prune their ideas, dismiss them as non-achievable," he says, "after a while, the creativity wanes." Marggraff says that people using a Smartpen testify that it changed their lives.

The pen allows one to record audio notes that are associated with any words or symbols written at the same time. Later the audio and written notes that were photographed by the pen can be transferred to a computer with a simple cable and searched on written terms. Notes can also be instantly shared over the internet, from the paper in a Wi-Fi environment, creating pencasts that can be shared in the cloud. The Smartpen is in fact a small computer, with a mini screen, a microphone, an high-speed infrared camera that captures 70 frames per second, a storage unit that holds up to eight gigabytes, and the special paper to write on can be bought or printed from one's computer.

Now that the Smartpen is a commercial success, Marggraff is ready to move on. He stepped down as CEO on January 19, ready for a new adventure. "What I like is starting from nothing and making something happen," he says. That takes focus and confidence, as well as resilience. "I failed once with the first version of the globe," he says, "I lost all the money that family and friends had invested in it, but I came back with a better version."

Marggraff is not overly precise in describing what might come next from his own think-tank. "I have ideas on how to help people realize their full potential," he says. "Web technology today can connect people to their potential in profound ways. There is so much information that especially younger people provide about themselves that, properly arranged, could offer insights to enable them to do things they were unaware they could achieve. There are extraordinary opportunities in helping people realize their potential."

Maybe it's genetic-last year Marggraff's son, Blake, won first prize at the Intel International Science and Engineering Fair with his partner, Matthew Feddersen, for a cancer treatment they worked on when they were both

LAMORINDA WEEKLY | An Intellectual and Technological Odyssey from Smartpen and Beyond Lafayette's Jim Marggraff empowers people seniors at Acalanes High School. Stay tuned - Marggraff is a name you will surely hear again.

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