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Ground-Breaking Designs for People with Disabilities Win Top Awards

Digital glasses which assist people who have lost the use of their arms and a wheelchair that goes up and down steps have been crowned the winners of a “Dragons’ Den” style design competition.

The Blackwood Design Awards - which discover, and champion, new and innovative ideas to improve the lives of those with physical or learning disabilities - recently took place at the Dundee Contemporary Arts centre and saw nine shortlisted inventors pitch for the top spot.

This year, for the first time, the competition was made up of two distinct categories. MEBot, a Mobility Enhancement Robotic Wheelchair was named Best New Concept, while GlassOuse, which uses Bluetooth to connect disabled users to computers, phones and televisions won the Best New Product title.

MEBot is a robotic-powered, six wheel wheelchair which has been designed to tackle both kerbs and challenging terrains, such as icy and slippery surfaces, as its large centre driving wheels can reposition themselves to simulate front-, mid-, or rear-wheel driving.

While the traditional power wheelchair can get stuck on difficult types of ground, MEBot uses its front and rear caster wheels to inch forward on slick surfaces. It has a seat stabilisation system which keeps the driver safely upright and also stair climbing ability – which is ultimately what set it apart from other wheelchair designs.

The MEBot team will now receive a cash prize of £2000 from BDA sponsor Kingdom Gas, professional support and guidance on design development from one of Scotland’s top product design companies, 4c Design, and backing from business law experts, Harper MacLeod, in addition to that of Blackwood.

Rory Cooper, Leader of the MEBot Design Team, said: “The MEBot was inspired by wounded, injured and ill veterans that would like to be able to do more than is possible with current wheeled mobility devices. We wanted to provide safe and expanded mobility and a design that is functional both indoors and outdoors.

“We entered the Blackwood Design Awards to challenge ourselves and to bring awareness to the needs of and opportunities for those with disabilities. We’re very excited to have won – it’s nice to have the validation of the innovation and hard work that our team put into the MEBot.

“It was a fun experience and we would definitely encourage others to participate next year. Ultimately, we’d like to license the MEBot to a commercial partner and see it transform the mobility and function of people with severe disabilities, and we’re very grateful to now have Blackwood’s advice and guidance.”

Designer Mehmet Turker entered pioneering product GlassOuse all the way from China. It is worn comfortably on the head like a pair of glasses and is made specifically to help those who cannot use a traditional mouse due to an inability to fully use their hands.

The headpiece has been designed for everyone but, in particular, to help those who have suffered traumatic injuries such as brain bleeds and tumours, strokes, spinal damage and cerebral palsy, which have left them needing additional support for everyday tasks.

Mehmet said: “The Blackwood Design Awards is something we have heard about for years and we’re absolutely over the moon to have won the Best New Product title. We entered as we share its aim to enable disabled people to live as independently as possible through designing accessible products in a way that is pleasing to the eye.

“Everyone here has worked extremely hard to perfect GlassOuse. Though the headpiece can be used by anyone, we wanted to create something that would also make everyday tasks a lot easier for those who have suffered life changing injuries.

“We’re currently designing GlassOuse 2 and are very excited for what’s to come in the future – especially now we have backing from Blackwood.”

Fanchea Kelly, Chief Executive at Blackwood, believes the competition is a great way to give designers a chance to showcase their talent, which wholly ties in with Blackwood’s ethos for providing innovative care.

Fanchea said: “We were blown away by some of the entries and it was extremely difficult to choose just two, but MeBot and GlassOuse are incredibly innovative products and have the potential to be truly life-changing for those with disabilities.

“We would also like to wish all the runners up the best of luck and much continued success in their design endeavours.”

The competition has built a reputation of enabling great success for winners, and entries now frequently come in from all over the globe.

For more information on MEBot, visit: <http://www.herl.pitt.edu/research/mebot>

For more information on GlassOuse, visit: <http://glassouse.com/>

Notes to Editor

Edinburgh-based charity, Blackwood, has more than 1500 homes throughout the country making it a leader in helping those who are disabled, elderly or with sensory impairments to live more independently.

As it works in 29 of Scotland’s 32 local authorities, it is more widely dispersed than most other care or housing providers and has embraced the challenges of taking housing and care into innovative areas at a time when funding is increasingly limited.

Blackwood is also renowned for constantly pushing the boundaries of technology to allow property adaptations which make a huge difference to people with disabilities.

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