

Making Accessibility Accessible

OT prof. Therese Willkomm turns everyday objects into useful devices

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Sometimes we see only what is, and not what could be. Take campaign signs, the kind made of corrugated plastic on skinny-legged stands that pock the American landscape at election time. Therese Willkomm looks at them and sees a cell phone holder, a stand for an iPad, or, turned another way, a document holder, any of which can help individuals with disabilities better use technological devices.

A clinical associate professor in the UNH department of occupational

“Assistive technology can be

therapy, Willkomm has been sharing her vision through assistive technology makers workshops where she teaches people how to make these low-tech products for individuals with paralysis. Funded through a grant from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, and with the goal of making 1,000 devices in one year, Willkomm has led more than 12 workshops across New Hampshire. In February, she reached her goal.

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The very first tablet holder Willkomm made was for herself; she called it “the Eileen” — as in, “I lean my iPad against it.” There are now more than 10 Eileen options, and Willkomm estimates 10,000 variations have been made and distributed in 32 states and eight countries.

“Assistive technology can be really expensive. Here is a way to create devices that are low-cost and sustainable,” says Willkomm, director of the New Hampshire Statewide Assistive Technology Program with UNH’s Institute on Disability. “So far, I have invented more than 1,200 solutions that can be created in minutes using everyday items in extraordinary ways. It can be as simple as adapting a pen.”

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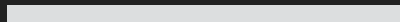
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