

*Jim Nalley & Chris Buehler of Emfinders
photo by Chris Fritchie*



individuals living in the United States are living with a diagnosis of Alzheimer's. It is estimated that approximately ten million baby boomers will eventually be diagnosed with the disease, adding to the \$148 billion price tag that dementia issues cost Medicare, Medicaid, insurance companies and businesses. It is estimated that approximately 340,000 people in Texas alone will have Alzheimer's by 2010, a 26 percent increase from 2000.

The majority of Alzheimer's patients live somewhat independently and are at risk of becoming lost with little warning and no access to help.

Families are often at a loss as to how to keep their loved one safe from the disorientation that accompanies an episode of dementia. Typically newly diagnosed patients expect a certain amount of freedom and independence, and the onset of symptoms is unpredictable, so they often feel smothered by what they see as over-protectiveness on the part of caregivers. As a result, the majority of Alzheimer's patients live somewhat independently and are at risk of becoming lost with little warning and no access to help.

Emfinders is a Frisco-based company currently developing a device that will help locate lost individuals. Their technology focuses on finding missing persons, not just tracking them. Hence the name "Emfinders," short for "Emergency Finders."

Peace of Mind for Families of Alzheimer's Patients

By Debbie Vallejo

WE'VE ALL HEARD the stories. An elderly woman suffering from Alzheimer's disease heads out to the grocery store and disappears only to be found the next day in a totally different city. A gentleman takes a walk and doesn't come back but instead is found three hours later miles away from home. Last year an 89-year-old Bedford woman was on her way home from her weekly manicure when she became confused and drove in the wrong direction. Her

body was found in her locked car in southern Oklahoma one week after she was reported missing. Families caring for individuals with Alzheimer's spend each day ensuring their loved one does not become another tragic story. But how does a caregiver balance freedom and quality of life for a family member with Alzheimer's and protect them at the same time?

According to the Alzheimer's Association more than five million

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IMPETUS FOR PRODUCT CREATION

Jim Nalley and Chris Buehler are cofounders of Emfinders and the brains behind its inception. Both men were involved in installation of location-finding equipment in cellular networks before the creation of their company. The idea for their technology took root in early 2006 when a young college girl made a cell phone call just prior to her being abducted. The location of the original phone call was pinpointed, but her cell phone could not be used to find her location after the abduction took place. After the tragic ending to this story, both Mr. Nalley and Mr. Buehler asked themselves this question, "How can advanced cellular location technology be put to use for those in distress who cannot make a call for help themselves?" After brainstorming the technical aspects and logistics of a location device, the two began identifying who would benefit from such technology. Young children and individuals with Alzheimer's were at the top of the list.

"Coincidentally, these are citizens least likely to be able or expected to use cellular technology to alert someone to their need of assistance," explains Mr. Buehler. "Emfinders was established to put the control and peace of mind in the hands of those caring for vulnerable members of our society." After considering their options, Mr. Buehler and Mr. Nalley approached the Alzheimer's Association about the viability of their idea.

Lisa Brodsky is the Director of Programs and Services for the Alzheimer's Association for Greater Dallas. When the cofounders approached her she agreed the idea had merit and potential for assisting families. "Chris and Jim came to me a little over a year ago when it was just an idea and I thought it was great," says Ms. Brodsky. She put them in touch with the national office in Chicago and the pair made a trip to meet with leaders in the organization to explain their idea and gather feedback. After receiving a positive response from the national

headquarters, Ms. Brodsky helped Mr. Nalley and Mr. Buehler work with a focus group of caregivers in the local area to brainstorm how best to package and handle the device. "The focus group gave them input on where the chip should be located and how it should be worn," says Ms. Brodsky. "The participants were all really excited about the technology."



EXPANDING THE SAFETY NET

Current location management in place for high risk individuals is limited. MedicAlert bracelets are worn by Alzheimer's patients so when they are lost or disoriented, another person can check the bracelet and call the number listed for help. The phone number on the bracelet calls a registration service, putting the lost individual in touch with a caregiver or emergency services. Emergency personnel or police are dispatched if necessary and the missing person is reunited with his or her caregiver. The current system works but relies on another independent party making a call to MedicAlert. The worst-case scenario is when an Alzheimer patient wanders off to an unpopulated area with no other individual around to make the necessary call.

In addition to the Medic Alert bracelet and registration system, caregivers in some states have access to Silver Alert, another system similar to the Amber

Alert, but for dementia patients instead of children. Texas is one of eight states that implemented Silver Alert last year. Not all states have the system and even Silver Alert is dependent on the wanderer being somewhere visible.

What makes the Emfinders chip so unique is that it can be activated from a remote locale. The chip is in a bracelet worn by the Alzheimer's patient, much like the MedicAlert bracelet. "Simplicity is one of its hallmarks," explains Mr.

Buehler. "The device is in a relatively dormant state, it has no lights, no bells or whistles. It is very passive looking."

This is how it works. A caregiver places a call to the Emfinders operation center when an individual wearing the bracelet goes missing. The operation center then verifies that a case has been opened with law enforcement and sends an activation command through local cell phone networks. The command activates the chip in the bracelet and the bracelet sends a signal to 911. The Emfinders operation center works with the 911 operator to provide details such as clothing worn and physical attributes of the patient client. The 911 operator relays the information to police officers dispatched to locate the lost person. When the police officer arrives on the scene he or she will assess the situation and decide if emergency personnel are needed.

The entire interaction between caregivers, Emfinders and 911 happens without the Alzheimer's patient having to push a button or talk to anyone. What is the significance of this technology? "It'll be the next generation of location technology," says Mr. Brodsky. "It provides peace of mind for caregivers constantly afraid their loved one in their care will wander off. Sixty percent of individuals suffering from dementia will wander at some point, so something like this can be invaluable."

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Next Month in *Frisco STYLE*

BUSINESS IS BOOMING in Frisco and for the sixth year *Frisco STYLE Magazine* will honor the winners of the annual Best of Business award. Each year area businesses submit their application and await the announcement of those selected in the October issue. You may submit your business for the 2009 awards by visiting www.friscostyle.com.

NORTH TEXAS ENTERPRISE CENTER

The North Texas Enterprise Center (NTEC) for Medical Technology found Emfinders to be so viable they offered their services and office space to the new company. NTEC assists selected medical technology entrepreneurs and start-ups with the challenges faced when beginning a new company. "They're an incubator and accelerator of early companies," explains Mr. Buehler. "They provide focus and attention in the high level business areas." In a nutshell, NTEC knows people and puts entrepreneurs in contact with members of the business community who can help. NTEC was able to provide general business advice, fund-raising assistance and business contacts in key industry and medical professional organizations. NTEC held a celebratory reception last month to commemorate the graduation of Emfinders from the Center's incubation period.

Funding is an issue for any start-up. Both Jim Nalley and Chris Buehler provided funding for their idea. Eventually private firms and venture capitalists provided needed capital to move forward with market research and development. One of the big reasons for settling the company in Frisco is the support of NTEC and the city's support of the Center, as well as the close proximity to several of Emfinders' partners.

READY FOR LAUNCH

The bracelet is now in the market research stage and Emfinders will go through a four- to six-week market trial period with approximately 50 individuals and their families. "We will enroll Alzheimer's patients and their caregivers, in addition to some 'intentional' wanderers in this trial," explains Mr. Buehler. "It will be conducted in both the Dallas and Austin areas."

Emfinders is planning to launch their product later this year and is aggressively working to get the device ready to meet their deadline. After the launch of the bracelet, Mr. Buehler and Mr. Nalley plan on developing other forms for their device. "We have learned from our research thus far there is not one single form factor that will appeal to all potential wearers," says Mr. Buehler. Some of their partners and focus group

members have suggested belt clip-on or shoe attachments. The choice of a bracelet for the first time around is as a result of brainstorming the form that would appeal to the largest customer base.

About 80 percent of elderly dementia patients are cared for at home, so Emfinders has chosen to target families providing at home care.

Pricing is currently \$99 for the device with a \$15 to \$20 monthly service fee. The package is one set price, with no hidden fees attached when the device is activated. Mr. Buehler and Mr. Nalley plan to advertise primarily through word of mouth and networking with caregiver associations. About 80 percent of elderly dementia patients are cared for at home, so Emfinders has chosen to target families providing at home care for loved ones in order to provide another safety valve for Alzheimer's patients and their families.

"We hear stories all the time of people going out to move their cars and they end up in the next city," explains Lisa Brodsky. "It's scary for family members worried that their loved one could be sitting in a parked car in 105 degrees. Someone can wander off when they go out to get their mail. It can happen as fast as that." This technology will provide families with an inexpensive support mechanism that can be utilized to provide care and a quality of life for their loved one.

So far Emfinders has no name for their device. "We are definitely open to suggestions," says Mr. Buehler. Send in your ideas, who knows, maybe you'll be responsible for naming the next generation of emergency location technology!

Debbie Vallejo is a freelance writer living in Frisco. Website references are also found on page 84.