Jean-Pierre Kempf, a Pioneer in Driving Aids

By Martine Kempf

At 23, studying physics and chemistry in Strasbourg, France, Jean-Pierre Kempf decided he wanted to drive a car just using his hands. It was 1954 and the only transportation he had had since he lost the use of his legs due to polio at the age of two, was a tricycle. He always had to leave it outside, in front of the school and now of the university. He was then carried by his classmates from classroom to classroom. He had passed the entrance exam for the National School of Chemistry but was denied access because of his disability. He was however still determined to become a research scientist.

Mechanics was his passion, so in his spare time he assembled a car out of various parts and adapted it to be able to drive it himself. He installed a ring on top of the steering wheel to accelerate, a lever left as a hand clutch and a lever right as a hand brake. "I realized that once I was behind the wheel, I was like anybody else!" he said, so he decided to share his experience: He sent a letter to a car magazine explaining how he was driving. The publication of this letter brought him such a large demand from paraplegics and amputees who wanted to drive, that he started his own company to adapt cars for them. He filed his patent for the accelerator ring in 1955.

At the very beginning most of his customers were in Paris, because the only rehabilitation center in France was in Paris, so he would make all the parts in his shop in Strasbourg and every week he would drive 8 hours (300 miles) to Paris where one of his customers had given him access to a workshop. He would park his car next to the customer's car and because he still didn't own a wheelchair, he would crawl to the customer's car with his parts and his toolbox. He would do the installation and if it took more than a day he would sleep in his sleeping bag and eat food he had brought with him because he couldn't go to a hotel or a restaurant. When his work was completed and his customer was happy, he would drive 8 hours back to Strasbourg.

For him the "thank you" from his customer was more important than the money he received. It took him over a year before he could buy a wheelchair. It was an Everest & Jennings folding wheelchair which totally changed his life. He was finally really independent.

His company became the leading driving aids manufacturer in France with installation sites and agents in most large cities in France and in several European countries. The accelerator ring and main hand brake became the standard hand controls in France and they still are today.

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He designed many innovative driving solutions through his 48 year career until 2002, like manual clutch, automatic clutch, control of secondary functions on the steering wheel, foot shifting, foot steering, joystick steering accelerator and brake, voice control for secondary functions, sliding door and wheelchair loading arm, turning seats, left foot accelerator, etc., constantly improving the solutions as new technologies became available. Jean-Pierre used to say: "A person with a disability should be able to drive the vehicle of his or her choice, like anybody else". He therefore accepted to adapt pretty much any vehicle, from the small Fiat to the Rolls Royce. His company adapted over 100 000 vehicles in his lifetime. "We are not building prosthesis to the cars", he used to say. "We are adapting the cars with the best technology available and making sure they look as nice as the manufacturers designed them. Kempf adaptations should look like factory made."

Jean-Pierre travelled extensively throughout Europe, driving an average of 60 000 miles per year. He wanted his adaptations to be safe, comfortable, elegant and very reliable. If he learned that one of his customers had a problem, he would not hesitate to take his car even if it was several hundred miles away, and go there to fix the problem himself.

He was involved in the design of his adaptations literally until the end of his life. It was late at night on April 10, 2002, he was testing a new mold for the plastic cover of the accelerator ring when he passed away succumbing to an aneurism.

His wife and his three children made sure his legacy lived on. His daughter, Martine who lives in Silicon Valley, California manages the company KEMPF SAS in France. In 2007 she started KEMPF Inc. in Sunnyvale, CA and Tampa, FL and in 2012 founded KEMPF in Beijing, China.

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