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Meet HiLois, the Tech-Enabled Photosharing App for Long-Distance Families

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Photo Credit: HiLois

By Courtney Gabrielson

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In 2011, Brett Harnett got a notification from his mom's primary care physician's office.

"She's called us 31 times," the doctors told him.

This information led Harnett and his brothers to begin an investigation into their mother's health. Eventually, their mom, Lois, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and the family moved her into a controlled facility.

"At that point, she could use the phone, but the phone calls weren't enough," Harnett said. "They became less and less feature-rich."

Lois would ask the same common questions about her grandkids, such as their names and ages, over and over. "As time went on, it became even more less creative; there was less open conversation," he continued.

Her deteriorating health led Harnett to consider how his family could better serve and communicate with their mom. [HiLois](#) was born.

"She didn't understand what the technology was, but she understood what it wanted to do. The pictures were sending her a message."

The first solution was to get a digital photo frame and a USB filled with pictures to share with Lois. It evolved into something more sophisticated as the iPad took off in 2012.

And now, in 2018, the final product is a free digital photoframe app and social support network for both Apple and Android phones and tablets. Users can create closed circles and choose a VIP within those circles who receives the pictures and messages. Administrators from within these groups then help control what is shared with the VIP. There's a brainteaser mode that provides the VIP with simple questions that get them thinking, with no consequences for wrong answers. The app debuted in digital stores last month.

The five-year journey to this stage was "very challenging," Harnett, the company's founder, told Cincy Inno.

A developer friend built the alpha version of HiLois — the version that was specifically hard-coded for Harnett's mom.

Lois responded to the tool, which ended up getting mounted to the wall. The family sent along snapshots of daily life and other notes, which they could control and pause from afar. That way, they could narrate the scene in the picture she was seeing when they chatted on the phone.

"The conversation changed dramatically," Harnett said. "She had something she could focus on, [like a] a photo of her granddaughter. We could talk about something that she's doing, not how old she is."

It was at this stage that Harnett, who is also the director for the Center for Health Informatics at the University of Cincinnati, realized that their creation was truly special, and began the search for funding. He and the HiLois team eventually received \$25,000 from the university's tech accelerator, which helped them bring the product to beta.

Then, there came \$100,000 in the form of an Ohio Third Frontier grant, which allowed the company to take the idea from beta and into production. Harnett said "an industrial strength" version of the app would be debuting in roughly a month.

"It's a rocky road," he continued. "None of us are getting paid."

It doesn't alter Harnett's passion for the work. Ultimately, it improved his conversations with his mom and will help others suffering from Alzheimer's or dementia, or the pain of being far from those they love.

Harnett knows this because of the impact the device had on his mother, Lois, who the eponymous app served before she passed away.

"She didn't understand what the technology was, but she understood what it wanted to do," he said. "The pictures were sending her a message."

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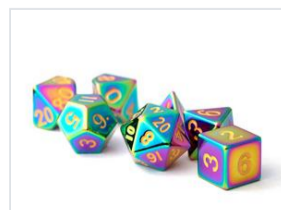
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