

Arts & Living

Teflon-coated retirement

It won't stick
on creative
tinkerer, 92

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At almost 93, Ed Prentke handles retirement — his third one or so — with panache. He probably can't help it.

"He looks at life from such a positive perspective," said friend Barry Romich, president of the Wooster firm they co-founded. "He's also creative and sharp and limitless in his areas of interest."

Ed and Esther, his wife of 63 years, thought they were set when they sold their East Side camera store in the '50s for \$10,000. In 1979, he retired again from the Prentke Romich Co., a firm that specializes in developing communication devices for disabled people. In 1991, he retired as clinical engineer at MetroHealth Medical Center.

He now sits on the board of Prentke Romich, reads Bill Gates, drives a red



ELIZABETH MALBY / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Esther and Ed Prentke furnished their den with recycled hospital furniture and his photos. The flower painting, lower left, was given by a disabled friend who used a Prentke invention and held the brush in his mouth.

sports car ("I don't speed; I just like the way a Toyota Celica handles") and plays his Rogers organ (loves rag-time but checks out hard

rock). He sails a boat he has owned for 50 years and keeps up with new cameras. With Esther, he supports charities, dines out with en-

tertainment book coupons and gleefully alerts the White House to send birthday greetings to seniors.

Prentke quietly savors accomplishments from an age when many are retiring. He was in his 60s when he and Romich created switches that allow those who are disabled to communicate as well as operate everyday and medical equipment. In 1982, Brandeis University named Prentke a "renaissance tinkerer" and gave him its Distinguished Service Award.

But the products really advanced when the company was licensed to use Minspeak, a communications system that uses pictures to represent phrases and ideas. Prentke was asked to speak at last year's Minspeak conference.

"He got a standing ovation," said Mary Evans, a speech pathologist who was director of sales for the company for five years. "People who use the aids crowded around to talk to him, and those who could write signed a certificate of appreciation."

SEE TINKERER/5-F

"I drove him back and he was terribly moved."

Degree from Case

Nudged to talk about his life and times, Prentke leads a visitor to a light-flooded den lined with recycled, neatly crammed cabinets and shelves. He wears a green plaid shirt, dark red suspenders and a twinkle in his eyes.

Prentke is the son of a menswear salesman who left Germany at age 15 and a homemaker. He sang in the glee club, built crystal sets and puttered with chemistry while attending East Technical High School. In 1926, he earned an electrical engineering degree from Case Institute of Technology.

He and Esther married in mid-Depression, opened a radio shop and added cameras when Prentke took up photography. He joined the Cleveland Photographic Society and exhibited in several May Shows. He photographed Charles Lindbergh, Charlie Chaplin and Mount Rushmore when only George Washington was peering out. When they bought a 28-foot, four-sail/inboard wooden ketch, they named it Ektar, for Kodak's then fanciest lens.

During World War II, Esther ran the store and Ed designed

and taught electrical engineering courses at Case and Fenn College, and joined a partner making small metal plane parts.

After the war, he developed a passion for the organ.

"We had a piano, but in the '50s a friend bought a Hammond organ, and it was so interesting I bought one," said Prentke. "I joined a performing group of 10 Hammond organs. Our instructor wrote the parts, and we played at the Masonic Temple. Do you want to hear a wonderful CD from the library? It's Tom Hazleton playing 'Ragtime's Greatest Hits,' on the Million Dollar Wurlitzer."

Prentke's work designing devices to help people with disabilities came about by coincidence.

Alone in the lab

In the 1960s, he invited a neighbor to sail. Dr. Charles Long, a researcher at Highland View Hospital, noticed the boat's custom-made electronic devices.

"He was studying the muscles of the hand and said he needed me at the hospital," said Prentke. "In 1964, they hired me as clinical engineer, gave me a lab and left me alone. I built equipment to measure the electrical potential of muscles and built custom devices for patients. And that year, I met Barry Romich, who became the principle friend of my life."

Romich, a Case engineering sophomore, had taken a part-time job at the hospital. "Meeting Ed was one of the best things to happen to me," he said.

The two started working to-

gether. At Long's suggestion, they formed a partnership in 1966 and began building custom devices at home for people with disabilities.

"Ed had business experience and technical skills; I was just a student," said Romich, president of the Prentke Romich Co. of Wooster. "If he had not formed the company, everything we did might have been just an academic exercise. Now we employ 135 people and are a world leader in communications devices for people with disabilities."

Big breakthrough

Their breakthrough was an auto-dialing phone. In 1973, the Veterans Administration bought 200 of them for \$360 each. "That was enough money to start a real business — a corporation, and hire one guy, Larry Ruffner, who still works for us," said Prentke.

"Ed is a wonderful man," said Susan Armbricht of East Cleveland. Due to polio, she spends nights in an iron lung. An early Prentke phone was her first lifeline to the world and is still her backup.

"If I have any problem with my phone box now, I call Ed, someone takes the box over and he fixes it. He also made special tongue switches for me, so if the motor on my iron lung gets weird, I can turn it off and on. He just keeps experimenting and improving things. When he told me his age, I almost called him a liar."

"Eddie and Esther have become my family in many ways," said Evans. "The relationship between them is radiant. He makes everyone's existence much more peaceful and serene. And he never fails to tell jokes. I gave him some new ones as a holiday gift."