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- Neil Schalke (left), an MSU student and Purple Heart recipient, received a device Thursday that would finally allow him to fish despite extensive injuries to his hands. The device was invented by Mike Duncan (right), a Lake City man who has invented several other contraptions. “There is life for these people,” he said. Pat Christman



- Mike Duncan’s Lend-a-Hand invention allows those with arm, wrist and hand disabilities to regain several abilities, including shoveling, cooking, raking — and fishing. Pat Christman



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Lend-a-Hand device works wonders

By Tanner Kent [The Free Press](#)

MANKATO — Neil Schalke and Dan Stewart have much in common.

Both are Marines. Both served in Iraq. Both bear visible scars of war and both worried their disabilities would never allow them to enjoy their favorite pastime again.

Now, both have Mike Duncan to thank the next time they go fishing.

“It’ll be good,” said Schalke after trying on the device that will give back at least one piece of the life he nearly lost six years ago in Iraq. “It’s probably been three years,” since he last went fishing, he said.

Schalke, a Wisconsin native, is a Minnesota State University student whose hands were severely injured in the fall of 2004 when a roadside explosive tore through his Humvee near Fallujah, Iraq.

More than a dozen surgeries were performed on his hands in the ensuing years. On his right hand, two fingers are missing; his left, though intact, has no feeling and little functionality. To this day, pieces of shrapnel will periodically work their way to the surface of his skin.

Stewart, who hails from Austin, suffered even more serious injuries when he was struck by shrapnel from a roadside explosive in 2005. He spent 32 days in a coma, had two metal plates inserted in his skull and suffered arm injuries due to blood clots that developed during his coma.

Several months ago, Stewart met Duncan for the first time. Duncan, a Lake City man who describes himself as a problem-solver, gave him a device he invented called Lend-a-Hand. The pseudo-prosthetic limb allowed Stewart to regain the ability to perform a variety of tasks, from shoveling snow to mowing grass to wetting a line.

Schalke, however, met Duncan for the first time on Thursday with help from a mutual contact. Stewart traveled to the meeting with Duncan, as well as Sue Seeger, who suffered a stroke at age 20 and inspired Duncan to create the Lend-a-Hand eight years ago when she shared her dream of playing golf despite being paralyzed on her right side.

“Eight years ago, it was a dead arm,” she said, adding that she now hits a golf ball 150 yards, and straight. “Now, I have all this range of motion.”

The meeting between Duncan and Schalke was set up by Pat Dotter, a representative of the Procurement Technical Assistance Center — which is, essentially, a federal program that helps small businesses to get government contracts.

Duncan had contacted Dotter a few months ago to help make his product available to veterans and military hospitals. Dotter also knew Schalke and said she immediately recognized how Duncan’s invention could improve his life.

“The thing that sold me on the product was seeing the excitement on Neil’s face when I told him he could fish again,” Dotter said. “That’s the perk of what I do.”

Lend-a-Hand attaches to a user’s non-functional arm or wrist. It stabilizes the arm and includes a long pocket in which anything with a handle can be inserted — including a fishing pole.

After designing the prototype eight years ago for Seeger, Duncan spent the next several years

traveling with stroke victims, amputees, cerebral palsy sufferers and others to make modifications. He added grooves to the fasteners so users could tighten them with their teeth. He added color to one side of the device so those with head injuries or vision impairments could tell which side was supposed to face forward. He's also made attachments for the device, including one that allows users to fire a 10-gauge shotgun so they can hunt.

Duncan describes himself as a problem-solver and scoffs at the notion that his inventions are due to intellect. Instead, he credits God and wife for inspiration (even though the latter died eight years ago from cancer) and said he's lived an "interesting and exciting life," from starting a junior bowling league in Lake City when he was a teenager to starting a band and playing music across the country.

But none of that, he said, compares to the sense of accomplishment he feels when people like Schalke are given a piece of their life back.

"For an old guy like me, it's exciting," he said. "I've never designed a product that has affected so many people."