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CHOOSING HOPE

- RENEE STOVSKY Of the Post-Dispatch
- St. Louis Post-Dispatch (MO)

- December 28, 2004
- Section: Metro

- Edition: Five Star Late Lift
- Page B01

***Kent Schien**, business owner and father of a disabled son, takes pride in his positive attitude and devotes himself to Easter Seals, earning "exceptional parent" honors from an international magazine. **Kent Schien's** philosophical outlook on life, he says, can be stated in a single word: choice.

"You can choose to have a positive attitude or you can choose not to," says Schien, 45, of Chesterfield. Schien, president and chief executive of **Innoventor Inc.**, a Maryland Heights-based engineering firm, prefers to take the upbeat approach, whether dealing with corporate decisions or personal matters. In large part, that's why both his nine-year-old company, named one of the top 50 technology companies in the St. Louis region last year, and his 22-year-old son Alan, who is severely disabled, have thrived. It's also the reason that Schien was recently named an "exceptional parent of the year" by Exceptional Parent, an international magazine serving people and families with disabilities, for his 20-year dedication to Easter Seals on a local, regional and national level. Schien, a native of Barry, Ill., near Quincy, graduated from the University of Illinois in 1981 with a degree in mechanical engineering and moved to St. Louis to work for McDonnell Douglas Corp. His wife, Carol, an accountant at Boeing and his former high school sweetheart, gave birth to the couple's only child, Alan, in 1982. Schien describes Alan as "a walking, talking, high-energy kid" until he was 2 1/2 years old. That's when he awoke crying one night. The Schiens went into his room to check on him, and to their horror found that he appeared to be having some sort of a seizure. Alan was rushed to the hospital. That began a 2 1/2-year quest to identify a malady that produced 10 strokes and multiple seizures before Alan was properly diagnosed with the rare Maya-Maya Syndrome, linked to

a type of muscular dystrophy-related disease called MELAS, which stands for Mitochondrial Encephalopathy Lactic Acidosis and Stroke-like episodes. Though treatments, including vitamin K pills, can offset the effects of MELAS, by age 5, Alan resembled a poststroke victim. His hands were partially paralyzed, his legs couldn't support his weight, and he was almost completely nonverbal. That began a 2 1/2-year quest to identify a malady that produced 10 strokes and multiple seizures before Alan was properly diagnosed with the rare Maya-Maya Syndrome, linked to a type of muscular dystrophy-related disease called MELAS, which stands for Mitochondrial Encephalopathy Lactic Acidosis and Stroke-like episodes.

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Throughout Alan's many hospitalizations, Schien became a tireless advocate for his son, always pressing doctors for research and referrals to help diagnose the problem. One day in 1986, a nurse named Rosalie Echele remarked to Schien that Easter Seals could really benefit from someone like him.

At first, Schien volunteered in small ways, helping to set up a toy-lending library, donating carpeting and caring for an aquarium at Easter Seals of Missouri Inc.'s headquarters, then located in a church basement in the Lafayette Square area. From there, he branched out into supporting fund-raising events such as KARS, which provides free car seats for disabled children, and implementing the popular downtown Hoopfest basketball tournament for the benefit of Easter Seals.

By 1990, he had been named volunteer of the year by the organization, which serves 55 counties in the St. Louis area, central Missouri and southwestern Illinois. Easter Seals, now located at 5025 Northrup Avenue, provides children's services, adult day services, camping and recreation and individual and family support and training to people with a wide range of disabilities; last year, it helped 4,500 individuals in the area, ages 6 weeks to 97 years old.

"Through Kent's help in coordinating fund raising, guiding the development of programs and raising the awareness of his community relative to the needs of children and adults with disabilities, his efforts have impacted thousands of lives," said E.P. Maxwell of Exceptional Parent magazine.

In 1992, Schien joined LaBarge Products Inc. as director of operations, with responsibilities for engineering, production, marketing and business management of commercial and government contracts.

Despite his burgeoning career commitments, he still managed to head the Missouri State Board for Easter Seals and serve on a national programming committee for the organization, which has its headquarters in Chicago.

Schien launched Innoventors in his basement in 1996. The company, now 65 strong with a team of 50 engineers, seeks to innovate and invent new products for industries from aerospace to agricultural fields. Schien also developed a corporate culture that focuses on "giving back" to the community.

For example, the **Innoventor** Idea People corporate team recruited more than 200 walkers -- and raised more than \$37,000 -- for Easter Seals' "Walk With Me" event in Forest Park in July. Innoventors also takes part in community events benefiting organizations from Habitat for Humanity to the 100 Neediest Cases.

In the meantime, Alan attended Special School District of St. Louis County's Litzsinger School and Neuwoehner School, graduating from the program on his 21st birthday. Now he attends an adult day camp run by the Association for Retarded Citizens during the week.

On weekends, the family makes a point of planning special activities together. Though Alan can only verbalize one word -- "uh-huh" -- and raise his hand to signify "yes," Schien says he and his wife understand their son's moods. Alan is particularly fond of music, movies, plays and baseball. Eating out at restaurants is another favorite pastime.

"Alan taught me a long time ago about the law of the echo," says Schien. "What you put out there comes back to you many times over."
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