



Estelle Condra poses in the computer room in her new house.

Banner photo by Rick Mansfield

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A high-tech home with primitive roots

You hear it often: computers are taking over. Slowly but surely, they're dehumanizing society. Chances are, you haven't heard too much about how computers can help people — how they help us overcome our handicaps and help us cope.

That's what makes David and Estelle Condra's computer system different. Mrs. Condra, a well-known storyteller in Nashville and throughout the world, has a hereditary, degenerative eye disease called retinitis pigmentosa. The disease prohibits her from reading, and anything at a distance looks blurry to her. For Mrs. Condra, the computer system in her home has become an extra eye.

Programmed onto the computer is the entire security system of the Condras' new home. Condra — who owns Dalcon Computer Center — and employees at Action Alarm Service did the programming and installation.

In addition to setting off beeps when a guest breaks the ultraviolet light rays that the alarm system shoots across the yard and the house, the Condras' computer lets them know of the presence of the guest through voice synthesizers.

Condra has also built a robot, which he keeps at his office. Mrs. Condra said the robot is just for fun, just for her husband to experiment with. It is not programmed to do anything spectacular. "Technology has not gotten far enough," she said. She predicted, though, that in the next five years, robots will probably be pouring drinks for people and vacuuming the floors. "But they still won't do windows," she joked.

Though its main job is to provide security for the Condras, the computer system is not all work. It also provides

entertainment for guests. When you turn one of the two computers in the small room off the Condras' master bedroom on, it identifies itself as Dave's computer in a slow, mechanical voice. It asks if you are having problems in the areas of health, money, work or sex. When you answer by typing one of the categories on the machine, the computer offers you advice. Then, it demands money.

The Condras also use the computer to help figure their finances. When the Condras' house, located on New Natchez Trace, was being built, all of the cost planning was done on the computer, Mrs. Condra said. She also uses the computer to file her recipes.

Although it plays such a large part in their lives, the Condras' computer system is unobtrusive in their home — centralized in that one small upstairs room. More conspicuous is the warm, primitive feel of the house.

Built of red cedar siding that has been left rough, and designed by Nashville architect Lisa Bradley, the house combines the old-fashioned and the contemporary.

"We combined our interests in the house," she said. "David is so technical. I'm the artist, or the earthy kind."

Mrs. Condra was raised in the small South African town of Evaton, near Johannesburg, where her father ran a grocery store and her mother ran a ho-

tel. She met Condra in 1972 at a party in Johannesburg, where he was working as an engineer. After living for a while in Atlanta, the couple moved to Nashville. Condra's family is from Old Hickory.

Though she likes the openness of her home's interior and the modern geometry of the exterior, it's not hard to see what Mrs. Condra holds most dear in her house — the authentic African artifacts she has brought from her homeland. Laid out across the glazed Italian tiles of the entrance hall is a zebra skin. Also in the hallway are several soapstone carvings from South Africa and a drum from Rhodesia. Until recently, Mrs. Condra used the drum as a prop in her stories about South African people. She brought another drum home from a trip to Africa this summer, and retired the older one to the entrance hall.

The wallpaper — a dark brown and black geometric pattern — in the Condra's dining room also looks African. In the corner of the living room — which rises dramatically 20 feet up to the roof of the house and opens up onto the master bedroom upstairs — Mrs. Condra keeps several of her most prized treasures: items made and used by African people that she acquired on a recent trip there. Mrs. Condra handled each one as if it were made of fragile glass, explaining that Africans never let white people take their possessions

from their villages. But, because she once lived in Africa and is trying to preserve the African heritage by telling her stories, she was allowed to take some of the articles, Mrs. Condra said.

Besides her new drum, which came out of someone's hut, she said, she showed a buckskin bag the Africans use to carry weapons, a beaded head band, a fly swisher made of coarse animal hair and small beaded bottles used by witch doctors.

Spread out in different areas of the living room are handwoven African rugs.

The kitchen cabinets, which are solid red oak painted black, have a texture Mrs. Condra said is similar to the skin of an animal.

"It has that grainy, satiny look," she said. The rough cedar wood, which the outside of the house is made of, and the cedar trim on the interior of the house, complement Mrs. Condra's primitive decorations.

From a little room up a few stairs from the kitchen, the Condras' house gets its name — the Story House. There, Mrs. Condra keeps her storytelling props — costumes, African blankets, instruments, necklaces and her story ring (a wreath African storytellers wear around their necks and hang objects, such as a lion's tooth, on to remind them of their story).

In her study, Mrs. Condra reads books and stories on a large machine called a Visualtek. The machine magnifies letters a hundredfold.

Having moved into the house only four months ago, the Condras are not through decorating or building. Mrs. Condra said she would like to turn the guest room at the front of the house into her "safari room." She has ordered beds from South Africa for the room.