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In the Loop

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By Rob Senior

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[Click here for an audio interview](#) with Ed Ogiba to learn more about this unique hearing-loop initiative.

Hearing loss changed Ed Ogiba's life -- twice. The first time was the sudden onset of a condition that took much of his hearing and altered his life, personally and professionally.

But Ed's perseverance led to change number two -- one he hopes will eventually lead to a better quality of life for people with hearing loss in the entire city of Sarasota, FL. Through the use of hearing loop technology, Ogiba hopes to make Sarasota more accommodating to people with hearing loss.

Ogiba is the current president of the Hearing Loss Association of Sarasota (HLAS) as well as owner of Group EFO, a Sarasota-based company that provides integrated marketing services for businesses and non-profit organizations. Through his career, Ed has led the development of new products and markets for such prominent companies as Kraft, 3M and Quaker State.

"I grew up as a Mad Man in the advertising business on Madison Avenue, and that whetted my appetite to get more involved in the design of new products right from their conception," he says.

But a bout with Meniere's disease cost Ed a substantial portion of his hearing, eventually reaching the point that he was unable to deal with large-scale projects like those of the aforementioned Fortune 500 companies.



Upon moving to Sarasota in 2006, however, Ed received a cochlear implant from the Silverstein Institute that allowed him to return to work at Group EFO. Shortly after receiving the implant, he attended a meeting of the HLAS. Ed began learning more and more about hearing loss and his own ability to restore his hearing.

"Maybe 80 percent of what is restorable comes from the [hearing device]," he allows, "but several HLAS expert speakers and members taught me the other 20 percent is up to the individual to re-train their brain to hear properly."

At the time, HLAS had been without a standing president for a while. Hungry for more knowledge and greater understanding of his condition, Ed volunteered, was nominated and ultimately elected president of the HLAS.

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Hearing Loop Technology

Early last year, the Hearing Loss Association of America (HLAA) worked in conjunction with the American Academy of Audiology (AAA) to start the "Get in the Hearing Loop" initiative.

"I'd never seen or experienced a hearing loop at that point in time," admits Ogiba.

But that didn't stop him from placing a temporary loop into one of his HLAS meetings to let members experience the technology. The difference was immediate -- and dramatic.

"From the first time I tried it, and every time since, I've been a huge fan of the technology," says Ogiba. "It's made it much easier for all of us to have much more open and complete discussions at meetings."

Almost immediately, Ogiba was inspired to make the technology available to the considerable hearing-impaired population in the city of Sarasota. But he knew he would face an uphill battle.

While it wouldn't be accurate to call hearing loop technology "unheard of" amongst the general population of the United States, it is safe to say the technology enjoys far greater prevalence and popularity in Europe than it does here. For example, when the joint initiative between HLAA and AAA began, the vast majority of people with hearing loss were unaware that the technology existed, let alone how to best utilize or activate it. As for Sarasota, there were no hearing loops anywhere in the community.

Luckily, Ed's marketing background aided him greatly in this process. After members experienced the temporary loop in that initial meeting, Complete Hearing Solutions, the loop provider, generously donated a permanent loop to be placed in the local library where HLAS meetings are held regularly. Ogiba points out, "We quickly appreciated that this product

instantly converts people to be avid fans who would be vital in promoting the system to the community." But the job was far from complete.

HLAS has 100 members, yet there are 110,000 people with hearing loss in the Sarasota area. "Much of our challenge became educating the entire community on what this technology could do and getting them to sessions where they could experience it. New initiatives are extremely fragile, and 90 percent are born drowning. If we were to succeed, we needed to create a pent-up demand for the system so people would support it with passion the moment it arrived," Ogiba says.

"Once this system, the first in Sarasota, was in place, we were poised to begin our strategic plan called Let's Loop SRQ!" he says. "Stage one was educating our own members about T-coils, how to use the system and to get some ambassadors to spread the word in the community."

Stage two depended upon the creation of an advisory board for HLAS. Ogiba was able to secure a panel of 22 advisors, including such local luminaries as Sarasota Mayor Suzanne Atwell. City Commissioner Paul Caragiulo, who owns two local restaurants, installed tabletop sound systems in those establishments to further the cause. Leading audiologists, ENTs and prominent city businessmen were enlisted as well. "Those leaders, like Downtown Sarasota Alliance Chair Ellen Hampshire, became critical to our ability to get the message out and establish connections," Ogiba adds.

Garnering the census information that confirmed Sarasota as the county with the highest incidence (16.1 percent) of hearing loss in the U.S. was a key component of Ogiba's strategy to get community leadership on board with his initiative. "It really got the city government's attention, and helped us to secure their support," he says.

The third and final step was to emulate the strategy that saw hearing loops become so popular in Europe. "Looking back, it seems that when the theaters in a particular city embraced the hearing loop, the rest of the community would follow suit," Ogiba observes. "Those theaters were the tipping point, and their success encouraged churches, banks, pharmacies and so many businesses to get in the loop to attract new members and customers as well."

Ogiba and HLAS hope to have all the major local theaters within the Sarasota area looped in 2012. The group continues to promote the technology to other area businesses and meeting places. Restaurants, churches and even grocery stores such as Whole Foods Market have gotten on board. "Our goal is to become one of the first 'hearing-friendly' cities in the country," says Ogiba. "But we've got a long way to go."

Ogiba started right at the top, approaching the largest theater in town -- the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, which seats more than 1,700 people. "We have an unusual town in that all of our theaters are non-profit organizations," he says. "So a theater would not be able to fund the system on its own."

Moreover, most foundations -- which are a critical source of funding for the Sarasota theaters -- abide by an unwritten rule of not awarding another grant to any organization that received one in the last year. Ogiba quickly realized it was difficult to convince non-profit organizations to use their annual allotment on the hearing loop cause.

"All of them had much bigger needs, dollar-wise," he says. "Also, most of the theaters had either FM or infrared 'headset' systems in place and therefore assumed they had solved the hearing-loss problem. These headset systems are ideal for people with mild losses who do not wear hearing aids, but it was difficult to get theaters to understand that the hearing loop system was the only answer for those who wore hearing aids."

Van Wezel Foundation CEO Norm Olshansky suggested that the Hearing Loss Association approach the Selby Foundation for a grant on behalf of his theatre, as well as others in town. "Once Selby realized how this technology not only could help our population with hearing loss but also could help with ticket sales, they viewed it as a win-win situation," says Ogiba. "They encouraged us to attract up to six theaters to be part of the grant."

The cause snowballed from there, with all nine major local theaters, offering 13 stages, signing on to accept a grant, if awarded, for a hearing loop system in their facilities. Just the fact that the Selby Foundation would entertain such an unusual group grant proposal was enough to get the theaters to reconsider and finally understand how hearing loops could reach all the remaining hearing impaired people that their headset systems could not.

The official announcement of the grant awards is planned for Dec. 15. HLAS and 110,000 residents with hearing loss hope it is a red-letter day.

"Hearing loss is often called 'the invisible disease' to rationalize why it often does not get the attention and support it deserves," Ogiba says. "But hearing loops have the power to transform those with hearing loss into a more active consumers and community-minded citizens. We can become the highly visible business-building force that most organizations are searching for in our down economy."

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