

Sterkens visits Kansas to promote hearing loops

By Kevin Groenhagen

“You know, losing your hearing, having a hearing loss, that’s the only disability that makes people mad at you,” a radio talk show host with hearing loss told his audience in 2012. “People don’t get mad at people that can’t see. They don’t get mad at people that can’t walk. They don’t get mad at people that can’t taste or smell anything.”

When you consider that hearing loss is the third most common health condition after high blood pressure and arthritis, we’re talking about the potential for millions of mad people. Fortunately, a little education concerning hearing loss can help end a great deal of frustration.

Juliëtte Sterkens, Au.D., a hearing loop advocate with the Hearing Loss Association of America, travels throughout the country to educate the public about hearing loss as a disability and to increase awareness about the need for an increase in the use of hearing loops to improve hearing accessibility. She was in Kansas to speak before the Kansas Hearing Society conference in Topeka on March 13. She also spoke at the Lawrence Sertoma Club on March 10, as well as at Theatre Lawrence and Unity Church in Lawrence on March 11.

“What a lot of places and hard-of-hearing consumers are unaware of is it’s their civil right to have some kind of accommodation made for their disability,” Sterkens said. “We all accept wheelchair ramps, elevators, and what have you, but we really don’t talk about hearing accessibility. That all falls under the Americans with Disabilities Act. That act requires public places to provide some type of auxiliary access or aids if doing so will give that individual equal access. If you go to a restaurant and you’re in a wheelchair, what does the restaurant do? It provides wheelchair access. Well, what does the restaurant do for people who have trouble hearing? Ideally, they would provide an area where it’s a little quieter or offer to turn the background music down for example.”

Theaters, churches, and other facilities might also provide those with hearing loss with assistive listening systems. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) recognizes three types of assistive listening systems, including FM and infrared systems. Unfortunately, these two systems require users to locate, check out, wear, and return special equipment, which is often a conspicuous headset that is incompatible with hearing aids and do not work for transient situations near check out registers or busy ticket windows.

The third assistive listening system recognized by the ADA is the hearing loop. Like the other two systems, a hearing loop takes a feed from a PA system or, for transient locations, a microphone mounted on, for example, a checkout register. The hearing loop system then transmits the feed through a wire loop that surrounds an audience or from a desk-mounted loop. This loop projects a magnetic signal to a telecoil receiver, which is found in all cochlear implants and about 70 percent of hearing aids. How do you know if your hearing aid has a telecoil?

“If your hearing aid has a button, then it is very likely your instrument is equipped with a telecoil,” Sterkens said. “That means you can push the button to activate this coil. So when you walk into a looped facility, you have to activate something on the hearing aid. It’s not automatic. If you are thinking of buying a hearing aid, make sure to get one that



Juliëtte Sterkens, Au.D.

has this little, built-in antenna.”

All cochlear implants and hearing aids use microphones. Unfortunately, while microphones can help our hearing, they also have negative features. For example, they pick up what is loudest, pick up what is closest, and cannot tell which sounds are important to the listener. For a person sitting next to someone munching on snacks toward the back of a theater or church, this could render hearing aids useless when it comes to listening to performers on a stage or a minister in the pulpit.

“Hearing aids help, but only for the situations they were meant for—one on one, face to face, quieter situations, or in smaller group situations,” Sterkens said. “So what may be mild background noise for someone with normal hearing becomes an interfering noise for someone with hearing aids. However, with a hearing loop the sound from the microphone goes wirelessly to the telecoil in the hearing aid and, in effect, the microphone that the minister wears becomes the microphone to the hearing aid, and the background noise is eliminated.”

Sterkens points to the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire, Ill., as an example of a facility in which those who are hard of hearing can take advantage of a hearing loop. Performances at the Marriott Theatre are presented in the round, which presents the hard of hearing with an additional challenge.

“When a performer turns around, you lose the ability to lip-read,” Sterkens explained.

With a hearing loop system, often no lip-reading is required.

“If you don’t have a hearing aid, you can pick up a loop receiver with headphones that you can then wear,” Sterkens added. “That makes a looped facility accessible for everyone, including those without hearing aids.”

In addition to theaters and churches, hearing loops have also been installed

in touring buses, taxis in New York City, and in homes. With a hearing loop in your home, you can actually listen to a television with the sound off since the television transmits the sound directly to your hearing aid.

While hearing loop systems have been in use for many years in Europe, they are relatively rare in the United States. In Lawrence, only a handful of facilities, including Theatre Lawrence, the Lawrence Public Library auditorium, the Dole Institute of Politics, and Marston Hearing Center, have hearing loop systems. On its website, Loop America lists just two other looped facilities in the rest of Kansas. By comparison, Loop America lists about 40 looped facilities in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, which has a population of about 66,000. That has a great deal to do with the fact that Sterkens lives in Oshkosh. She and her husband, retired mechanical engineer Leroy “Max” Maxfield, have installed dozens of hearing loops in Wisconsin churches and other facilities around the Fox Valley area, and have helped foster hundreds more throughout Wisconsin.

Interestingly, Sterkens soon realized that the hearing loops ended up benefited even those who were not currently wearing hearing aids.

“I personally found that when loops started getting installed in my community, people were less reluctant about getting hearing aids,” she said. “They heard from other users how hearing loops improved the utility of hearing aids in places where hearing aids alone had limited capability.”

As a hearing loop advocate for the Hearing Loss Association of America, Sterkens has traveled to Kansas and other states to spread her message beyond Wisconsin. She has also been recruiting local advocates to help spread her message. One of those advocates is Dr. Richard Meidinger, a retired radiologist. Meidinger, a Friend of the Dole

Institute, Jamie Simpson, who is the inaugural KU Director for Accessibility and ADA Education, and Bob Newton, the sound designer for productions at Theatre Lawrence, consulted with the Dole Institute of Politics on its loop hearing system acquisition. Sterkens shared her PowerPoint presentation with Meidinger so he can educate the public about hearing loop systems.

“Everything was fine for about the first four years after I retired and moved to Lawrence from Topeka,” Meidinger said. “But then my hearing just tanked. If I take these hearing aids out, I can’t hear. When I started losing my hearing, I was downright depressed. I found myself going away from people.”

The social isolation Meidinger experienced is common among those with hearing loss. Unfortunately, in addition to depression, social isolation has been linked to an increased risk of death from conditions such as heart disease. In addition, researchers at Johns Hopkins Medicine followed 639 people ages 36 to 90 for nearly 12 years and found a direct relationship between the participants’ degree of hearing loss and their risk of later developing dementia or Alzheimer’s disease.

“In my business, you have to communicate,” Meidinger continued. “I was still driving to Topeka to deal with people without insurance as a volunteer physician at Marian Clinic. I’d have to go into a small room where I could talk to patients face-to-face because I was really reading lips and facial expressions as much as I was hearing.”

After getting hearing aids, Meidinger went to the Hearing Loss Association convention in Austin last year on the recommendation of a good friend.

“Every convention room—small room, big room, and auditorium—had a loop,” he said. “When the loop was on, it was as if you were standing in front of the speaker, even if you were 50 yards back. It was just remarkable. It was clear and crisp.”

For more information about hearing loop systems and hearing loss in general, please visit Hearing Loss Association of America’s website at www.hearingloss.org. Additional information is available on Sterkens’ website at www.LoopWisconsin.com, and www.HearingLoop.org.



This logo features the universal symbol for hearing assistance along with an added “T,” which signifies an available telecoil compatible system.

When placed at entrances, the sign informs people that the venue is looped.