

# Hearing aid loops help spread the good news

Area churches take advantage of technology allowing seniors to fully participate at Mass

BY STEVE WIDEMAN | FOR THE COMPASS

APPLETON — Raising his right arm high above his head, Tom Steger firmly grips the .32 caliber starter pistol in his hand, his forefinger poised on the trigger.

Fifty yards away a half-dozen teenage sprinters kneel, nervously cradling their feet in the starting blocks for the first of dozens of heats Steger, the official starter, will commence during the high school track meet.

As the athletes lift their knees from the track, Steger squeezes the trigger, but then holds off and slides sound-deadening protective muffs from his ears as someone approaches with a last-minute question.

Question answered, Steger looks to the runners set in their blocks, raises the pistol and, with the protective ear muffs resting forgotten on his shoulders, quickly squeezes off a shot, the sharp bang from the gunpowder-packed blank shell startling him.

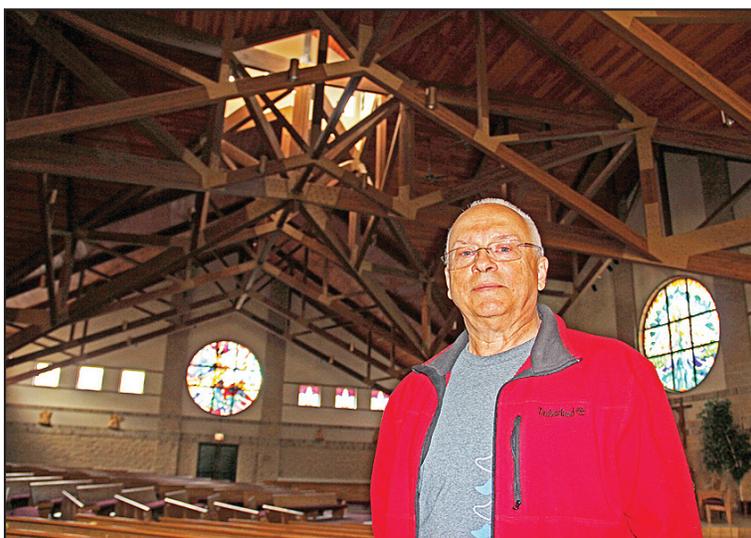
It isn't the first time in his 31 years as a track and field official Steger, 69, fired the starting pistol either unknowingly or by design without adequate ear protection.

The result is significant loss of hearing for the devout Catholic and long-time choir member at St. Bernadette Parish, who now must wear a hearing aid.

"I have trouble being pitch-perfect when I sing," Steger said.

But the burning of the mortgage at St. Bernadette two years ago has allowed the parish to light a fire of joy in their faith among Steger and other parish members suffering from hearing loss.

St. Bernadette joined a growing list of Catholic churches and churches of all faiths purchasing and installing hearing aid loops allowing those with hearing loss to hear and partici-



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**Tom Steger, a track and field official who uses a starter pistol to begin high school track events, said 31 years of loud pistol firings diminished his hearing. Today he wears a hearing aid. However, the device had limited success at St. Bernadette Parish, where he is a member, until the installation of hearing aid loops.**

pate more fully in the Mass.

"When the priest speaks it is like he is talking right in my ear," Steger said.

"At first it was a weird sensation.

I heard so many things I hadn't heard for so long. It was like I had to train my brain to hear again. Now my pitch is better when I sing. I can even hear the babbling of water in the baptismal font."

The installation of hearing aid loops allows people to use the Telecoil, known as the "T" coil, in their hearing aids to pick up a wireless signal from a special transmitter to clearly hear voices and other sounds, said Dave Scroggins, who installed the hearing aid loop system at St. Bernadette shortly before Christmas.

Scroggins, owner of DSR Sound, Inc., of Kiel, and his friend Jean Lulloff, are a busy two-person team installing the hearing aid loops in churches and other public buildings in northeast Wisconsin and as far away as a major performing arts

center in Fort Collins, Colo.

"We've done more than 50 installations in the past year," said Scroggins, who has installed loop systems

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**Fr. Richard Allen**

at St. Margaret Mary, St. Gabriel, St. Patrick and St. John the Baptist parishes in Neenah and Menasha.

A handful of companies install the systems locally.

"Typically someone in a congregation will read up on the hearing aid

loop system and wants one in their church," Scroggins said.

Scroggins said the audio loop, also known as an induction loop, involves using wires placed around a room's perimeter or down the middle of an aisle in a church sanctuary as an antenna to distribute a magnetic, wireless signal to hearing aids and cochlear implants equipped with a "T" coil setting.

The "T" coil allows magnetic signals from an amplifier connected to a dedicated microphone to feed the spoken word directly into a hearing

aid instead of through the hearing aid's microphone, eliminating background noise.

According to the Hearing Loss Association of America, some people describe this as "having binoculars for their ears."

"People will say 'Wow. I haven't heard like this for 30 years,'" Scroggins said.

He said an estimated 70 percent of hearing aids include a "T" coil, but most people don't realize their hearing aid has the coil or how to turn it on.

"You can just visit your audiologist to make sure," Scroggins said.

The cost to install a hearing aid loop system generally ranges from \$3,500 to \$7,500, but can vary widely depending on construction of the church, Scroggins said.

Fr. Richard Allen, now retired, recalls the installation of a hearing aid loop when he was pastor at St. Gabriel Parish in Neenah in 2010.

"A lot of times I could literally see the response to the loop," Fr. Allen said. "I would start talking and people would start looking. I realized that was the first time many of them heard the Mass. People would come up to me and say that was the first time they heard the Mass in years. I heard that enough times that it justified our investment. People were very appreciative."

The Neenah Knights of Columbus Council 5514 provided the impetus and some funding help in getting the loops installed at St. Gabriel and St. Margaret Mary churches.

"One of our Knights, Jerry Van Handel, wears a hearing aid and was very supportive of getting a loop at St. Gabriel. He said it was the first time in 30 years he heard the Mass," said former Council 5514 Grand Knight Ed Sypek, a member of St. Margaret Mary.

The council effort attracted private donations of \$5,000 for St. Margaret Mary and \$2,500 for St. Gabriel to help defray installation costs. The Knights made up the difference in the costs.

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