

# LOUD AND CLEAR

LOOPS MAKE LIFE EASIER FOR THE HARD OF HEARING  
BY TERRI DOUGHERTY



Tanya Schwartz-Roeper with her husband, Randy Roeper, and sons, Oliver and Jonah.

With the touch of a button, Tanya Schwartz-Roeper's world widened.

Hearing aids help the 46-year-old Ripon woman pick up sounds, despite her severe hearing loss. They're of little help, however, in large buildings.

As she was struggling to hear the Bible readings at a lessons and carols service at a local church, she remembered that her hearing aids had T-coils. When she pressed a button on her

hearing aid, it was like the speaker was talking directly into her ear.

"I was amazed that it worked and I was able to hear every word of every speaker," she says. "It was an emotional experience for me."

### Picking up signals

A T-coil inside a hearing aid acts like an antenna, picking up sounds being broadcast over an audio system and sent through a hearing loop. It can make a remarkable difference for people like Chris Prust, who has hearing loss because of a birth defect.

"Even after wearing hearing aids, using FM systems, completing a LACE course (a computer course that teaches better listening skills), nothing made as big of an impact on my ability to hear as hearing loops," the Oshkosh woman says. "The first Sunday the loop system was activated in my church was one of the most memorable days of my life. For the very first time I was able to hear every word and it was as if the pastor was speaking directly into my ear.

"As I looked around the congregation other people who wear hearing aids had looks of wonder on their faces and I knew they were experiencing the same thing," she adds. "Some of us had tears streaming down our cheeks."

### Looping Wisconsin

A hearing loop eliminates the background noise and distortion people with hearing aids experience in large buildings. For the system to work, however, a building must be equipped with the loop.

In its simplest form, the loop is a wire installed in a building's basement or floor. It transmits the audio from the public address system into hearing aids equipped with a T-coil receiver.

"It's like you putting your ear on the speaker," says Juliette Sterkens, an Oshkosh audiologist who is on a national task force on hearing loop technology. "It brings the sound right in the ear without distortion, reverberation or background noise."

Sterkens and her husband, Le-Roy Maxfield, have been installing the loops for two years. Maxfield, an engineer, retired from Oshkosh Corporation and helped Sterkens found Fox Valley Hearing Loop.

The loops are common in Europe, says Sterkens, a native of the Netherlands. After hearing a presentation about the system at a conference in Michigan, she began reaching out to area businesses, architects and audio companies to begin "looping Wisconsin."

"When I was going to school in the late 1970s they were already in use in the Netherlands," she says. "I always wondered why they weren't in use in this country."

### Significant difference

Sterkens regularly gets comments from people who have experienced the loop for the first time and are amazed at what they can finally hear.

The difference a loop can make was emphasized to Rachel Benton when she attended a graduation ceremony and Oshkosh Symphony concert on the same day. The symphony came across loud and clear because of the loop, but that was not the case at the graduation.

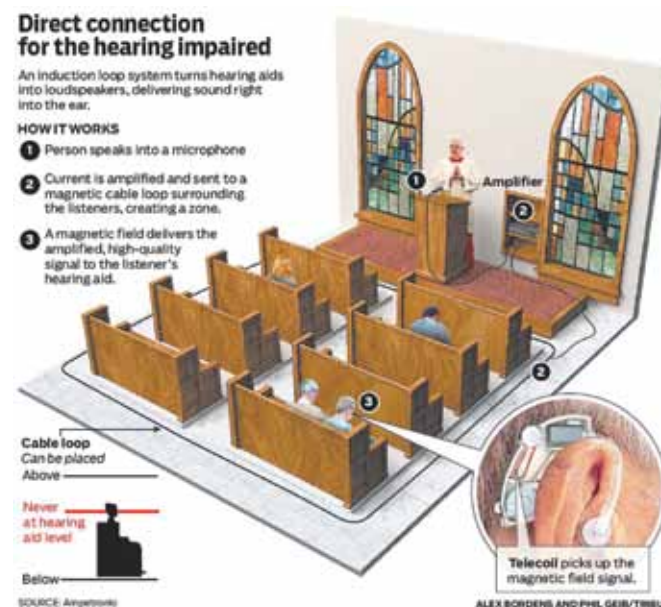
"It was difficult at times to hear and understand



Juliette Sterkens

"I cannot explain how much of an impact hearing loops has made in my life. It is like the first time you get a dishwasher – you never want to be without one again."

Chris Prust



what was being said," she says.

The loops are installed in more than 40 places in Northeast Wisconsin, from libraries to churches and the Fox Cities Performing Arts Center. They cost thousands to install, but make a significant difference for those with a hearing handicap.

### Spreading the word

After experiencing the difference they make, Rosemary Smith, dean of the College of Nursing at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, would like to see more of them. Deafness is an invisible disability, she notes, and people who can hear often don't realize the enormity of what a hearing loop can do.

"Having the speaker's presentation going right into your hearing aids improves the quality of what you hear, what you retain and the amount of energy you expend to hear," says Smith, who lost the ability to hear high frequencies in her mid-30s after undergoing chemotherapy treatments. She wears

hearing aids to accentuate the ranges she can hear, but still has difficulty at times.

"If I was going to a wedding or a play at the university, and was sitting in the middle or back rows, I wasn't hearing," she says, adding that in airports she cannot hear the call for her flight.

"If I'm traveling alone I'm always watching the crowd," she says.

Hearing was no problem, however, during a wellness presentation at the Oshkosh Convention Center, which has a hearing loop.

"I didn't have to be in the first or second row to hear. I didn't miss 30 or 40 percent of the presentation," she says. "I could experience what a normal person could experience."

Some businesses and schools use FM systems, which transmit the sound to a receiver. However, the battery-operated devices are not always dependable and the speaker and listener must both be using the system.

For Prust, nothing compares to the sound quality of a hearing loop. Prust, who is retired from her job as a social worker at a mental health institute, now uses some of her time to advocate for hearing loops.

"I cannot explain how much of an impact hearing loops have made in my life," she says. "It is like the first time you get a dishwasher – you never want to be without one again."

"I want hearing loops installed everywhere I go: the theatre, concert halls, churches, offices for a doctor, optometrist or dentist appointment. Anywhere that I go where the loop would allow me to function as normally as possible.

"Normal is the best word to describe how I felt that first time in church," she adds. "I felt normal for the first time and realized all that I had been missing." W



HEARING LOOP INSTALLED  
Switch hearing aid to T-coil