

KEEPING EVERYONE 'IN THE LOOP'

How Peggy and Terry help others hear the word of God

PEGGY SIMON'S HEART SANK when one of her older clients told her that all she could do at Mass was sit and pray because she "couldn't hear or understand anything."

As a lifelong Catholic and an audiologist, Peggy knew it was time to merge those two passions.

"I just had to do something," says Peggy, a member of St. Francis de Sales Parish and owner of Hearing Wellness Center, both located in Norton Shores.

Peggy and her husband, Terry, an engineer and entrepreneur, soon began manufacturing and installing hearing loop systems at Catholic churches all over the Diocese of Grand Rapids – effectively turning what had been disjointed garble for many into the clear and comprehensible word of God.

A hearing loop is a special type of sound system for use by people with hearing aids. The hearing loop sends a magnetic, wireless signal from the loop cable, normally tucked under the carpeting or lining the perimeter of the church, through the T-coil in the hear-

ing aid to the ear, eliminating background noise and reverberation.

Churchgoers without hearing aids can also benefit from a loop system by using one of the loop listening devices, essentially a small receiver with headphones, which are available in the back of most churches.

"Everybody should be able to hear the word of God," Peggy says. "That is what started this whole ministry of ours. When a few of my patients told me they couldn't participate at Mass because they couldn't hear, I looked at Terry and said: 'We can change that.'"

BY TOM KENDRA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
ROB SCHUMAKER

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- PEGGY SIMON

A new kind of power couple

The first commercial loop system the Simons installed was at St. Patrick-St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Grand Haven in 2006 – and it opened to rave reviews.

Word spread quickly among the Catholic churches in the diocese about the “loop couple” in Muskegon who were installing these systems at low or no cost.

Over the past 14 years, the Simons have installed systems in hundreds of churches, both Catholic and other denominations. The couple have also “looped” a variety of public facilities – notably the Frauenthal Theater in downtown Muskegon and the Muskegon County Airport.

Perhaps nowhere is the impact of their work more pronounced than at their home parish of St. Francis de Sales, which happens to be named for the patron saint of the deaf. The couple made a dramatic video of the late Father Phil Salmonowicz reading the Gospel at the massive steel and concrete structure – the first part of the video showing the echo and garbled noise without the loop system and the second half illustrating the clarity the technology provides.

The couple took a break from their busy schedules recently to talk about their strong Catholic faith and their passion for helping people hear, which have intersected in their current ministry.

Peggy's interest in hearing was actually sparked during Mass at St. Francis as a little girl. She was fascinated by a family that would always sit near the front, because the mother would translate the Mass in sign language to her deaf son.

“It was beautiful watching them during church,” recalls Peggy, who opened the Hearing Wellness Center in 2004. “That family motivated me to learn sign language and that is why I am an audiologist today.”

Terry also grew up in a strong Catholic family, but didn't get involved in the hearing industry until after he married Peggy in 1992. He would accompany Peggy when she spoke at hearing conventions, where he was often bored during the day.

“So I just randomly went to a seminar on hearing loop systems and was blown away,” Terry recalls. “I told Peggy, ‘We have to start installing these in her patient's homes.’”



The hearing loop system at St. Francis de Sales Parish sends a wireless signal to T-coil equipped-hearing aid like the one Peg and Terry are holding. This technology allows a person with a hearing aid to hear the priest as if he is sitting right next to them.



HEAR THE DIFFERENCE:
bit.ly/HearingLoopDemo



Paid in tears (and cookies)

It didn't take long to see the dramatic effect the technology had on people's lives.

"The first one I did was for a lady in Spring Lake," Terry recalls. "When we did a test, she started crying, and I thought it was too loud or something was wrong. But she said: 'This is the first time I've been able to hear my TV.' I knew right then this was something I had to pursue."

Terry took a leap of faith, leaving the security of his job in software development to start perfecting the process of making and installing loop systems. That work culminated in 2009 with the opening of his company, inLOOP, based in Shelby in Oceana County, which designs, installs and services home and commercial induction loop systems.

The Simons soon realized that installing loop systems would be a perfect way to give back to the Church that has guided them throughout their lives. They began by charging churches for the cost of supplies, which consists mainly of an amplifier and long lines of cable, but once their factory opened and they had access to more materials, they started doing church installations free of charge.

The couple say they are paid in many ways, notably the blessing of meeting new people and experiencing different faiths. They always go to services after doing an installation to test the equipment.

One of their favorite installation stories was at the Marywood Campus Motherhouse in Grand Rapids in 2008, where Peggy fitted 27 Dominican sisters with hearing aids and Terry installed 11 separate loop systems (in exchange for a batch of fabulous macadamia nut cookies).

"Working with the sisters was such an honor," says Peggy. "One of them was so excited and she said: 'My feet feel like they want to dance!' That's just one of hundreds of neat stories we've accumulated along the way. Those moments make this work so worthwhile." †

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