

# Art museum adding system for hard of hearing

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In time for the upcoming Santa Barbara International Film Festival, people suffering from hearing loss will be able to enjoy the movies shown at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's Mary Craig Auditorium in a whole new way.

The auditorium, one of the film festival venues, will be enhanced with a "hearing loop" system donated by Santa Barbara-based company Otojoy.

"The great thing about hearing loops is that people hear the sound without any extra background noise," Otojoy founder Thomas Kaufmann told the News-Press. "From the microphone to your ear — it's as if someone is talking to you from a foot away."

Mr. Kaufmann came to Santa Barbara to earn a master's degree in chemistry at UCSB. He founded Otojoy about six months ago and recently learned about hearing loop systems when he met local audiologist Donna Gilmartin, who is now part of Otojoy.

While digital hearing aids enhance hearing in conversational settings, for many people the sound becomes unclear when auditorium or television loudspeakers are far away, when the context is noisy, or when room acoustics reverberate sound.

A hearing loop magnetically transfers the microphone or TV sound signal to hearing aids and cochlear implants that have a "telecoil" receiver.

This tiny, inexpensive receiver

transforms hearing aids into loudspeakers that deliver clear sound fitting the individual's level of hearing.

"You need something that's customized to the person, and no other hearing system can do that," Mr. Kaufmann explained.

Most hearing aids already have the functionality, so those wearing them just need to see an audiologist to have the device programmed to receive the signal.

Hearing loops, which are installed through a system of fine copper wiring placed underneath carpet or floor or in walls, can be used to improve sound in theaters, churches, auditoriums, airports and train stations as well as in homes.

In November, Otojoy installed the first hearing loop system in Santa Barbara at Wood Glen Hall, a retirement community and meeting place of the local chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of California.

"The beauty of it is that the sound force comes directly to your hearing aid without any outside interference," said Claudia Herzog, a leader at the Santa Barbara chapter of the Hearing Loss Association for four years.

She has struggled with hearing loss for more than four decades.

"The result is very pleasing," Ms. Herzog said of the hearing loop system. "That's why we all end up smiling when we hear it."

While expensive to install, the systems are low maintenance and last a long time, said Ms. Herzog, who had a hearing loop system put in one of her rooms at home about seven years ago.

Fellow Hearing Loss Association leader Bonnie Adams was just as thrilled with the hearing loop system and the difference it made at meetings.

"It's just amazing. It brought everything right into my hearing aid," she said. "My goodness, I could actually watch the speaker instead of looking at the screen (to read the captions)."

An estimated 17 percent of Americans report some degree of hearing loss, according to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders.

"Hearing loss is one of the biggest disabilities in the country, population-wise," noted Ms. Adams.

Not all those who are hard of hearing are seniors — more than half of people with hearing loss are working age, she said.

The Wood Glen Hall system improves hearing for Hearing Loss Association meetings with as many as 40 attendees, as well as residents. With the Mary Craig Auditorium, which seats 150 people, the hearing loop system will help a larger audience to hear better.

"We are grateful for the generous donation by Mr. Kaufmann and Otojoy. We hope that this new technology will enhance the experience of all with hearing loss in the museum's Mary Craig Auditorium," said Katrina Carl, public relations director for the museum.

After the museum installation is finished, Mr. Kaufmann hopes to implement hearing loop systems at local schools, movie theaters, churches and other places.

In some cases, those with hear-



COURTESY PHOTO

**Local audiologist Donna Gilmartin, left, and company founder Thomas Kaufmann teamed up for Otojoy, a hearing care company that will install a new "hearing loop" system in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art's Mary Craig Auditorium.**

ing loss have not heard music, a sermon, a lecture or a movie properly in years, Mr. Kaufmann said. He enjoys being able to help people hear with

clarity and witness their reactions, he told the News-Press.

"It's so moving when you see these people."

For more information, go to [hearingloop.org](http://hearingloop.org).

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