

Hats off to another community hero!

By Norman Olshansky

Many of us were attracted to and moved to the metropolitan Sarasota area in order to take advantage of the fantastic weather, beaches and lifestyle. Another key factor that makes our community so attractive and unique is that we are known far and wide as an art and culture Mecca.

One of the not so well known facts about the Sarasota/Manatee region is that we have the largest percentage of people with hearing loss per capita than anywhere else in the nation. Too many of our residents and tourists are unable to enjoy the outstanding performances that take place at our local theatres and performing arts venues. Many lectures, plays and musical performances, that most of us find so much a part of our lives, can't be appreciated by people with significant hearing loss.

While the headset sound enhancement technology, which is available at most of our theatres, works well for those with minor hearing loss, it does not work for those with hearing aids and cochlear implants. As a result, tens of thousands of people in our community can't take advantage of the wonderful performances most of us have come to appreciate that makes our community so special.

This is about to change due to a passionate individual leader, a social service organization, community funders and a unique collaboration within the arts community.

Ed Ogiba, President of the Hearing Loss Association, has a vision to make Sarasota the most hearing friendly community in the United States. He was familiar with the hearing loop system technology which has been in use extensively in Europe for decades. He learned that once performing arts venues in Europe put in hearing loops, churches, synagogues, libraries, community centers, airports, restaurants and others followed.



The loop system allows amplified sound to be sent wirelessly directly to an individual's hearing aid or cochlear implant thus providing sound that arrives programmed according to the person's unique hearing needs.

Ed Ogiba was able to get 11 performing arts venues from Bradenton to Venice to collaborate on a fundraising effort to install the loop system in each of their theatres and performing arts auditoriums.

Thanks to the encouragement of Dr. Sarah Pappas, the generosity of

the Selby Foundation with assistance from the Sertoma Club, all of the venues will be looped this year. The largest facility, the Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall received the Sertoma Grant this summer and has already installed it's system, which is in operation. The remaining venues, will have the loop installed over the next several months. They are: Asolo Theatre, Florida Studio Theatre, Manatee Players, Neel Performing Arts Center, The Player's Theatre, Sarasota Opera, Sarasota Orchestra, Venice Community Center, Venice Theatre and West Coast Black Theatre Troupe.

This is another example of what visionary leadership with community collaboration and support can accomplish. It's a win-win for our community, for those with hearing loss and will enhance attendance at our local performing arts venues.

Ed Ogiba and the Hearing Loss Association have also arranged for the hearing loop to be installed at Alderman Oaks, Caragiulo's Restraunt, North Sarasota Library, Owen's Fish Camp and Whole Foods Market. In addition the following venues will be looped in the near future: Ear Research Foundation, First United Methodist Church, Glasser Schoenbaum Center, Selby Library, Senior Friendship Center, Unity Church and Venice Presbyterian.

Hats off to Ed Ogiba and all who have worked with him and the Hearing Loss Association. We can now add to our points of pride that we are the most hearing friendly place in America.

Norman Olshansky is the President and CEO of the Van Wezel Foundation

This was a Letter to the Editor of the Herald Tribune and Sarasota Observer.