

Loops at the Library

BY DOROTHY C. MILLER AND WARREN BROWN



What do hitching posts and hearing loops in Ohio have in common?

The library.

The Geauga County library system, in the heart of Ohio's Amish Country, serves patrons with the time-tested technology of hitching posts for horses and hearing induction loops for people with hearing loss. We went to Geauga County to find out how this rural library system became a trailblazer. As a technology, loops are pretty old, having been in use for decades in Europe. As a trend, hearing loops are pretty new in the U.S. Geauga County patrons are enjoying the advantages of loops thanks to a forward-thinking group of people. And it all began with a single advocate.

Lynn Peskoran, the former fiscal officer at Henderson Library in Ashtabula County, Ohio first discovered hearing loop technology when doing research for her

mother, who was experiencing hearing loss and had lost her social work job because of it. Her mom, Esther Blevins, a pillar of the community, was a dynamic activist and enjoyed participating in community events. Caregivers for Esther's ailing husband at first thought she had dementia when she seemed to get medical instructions wrong, but Lynn helped her find out the problem was her hearing. Hearing aids helped Esther a lot, but not enough to prevent her from her ongoing withdrawal from community activities. She loved to play bridge as well, but resigned herself to giving that up too. Then everything changed.

Lynn discussed the situation with Ed Worso, who was then director of the Henderson Library. He saw the

benefit of installing induction loops in the facility. The time was right since they were remodeling. Lynn and Ed swung into action. After a few false starts, including a company that installed the loop incorrectly, they got what they needed. They installed hearing loops in the community meeting room and at the circulation/reference desk. Esther could use the library with ease and attend meetings there simply by switching on the telecoils (t-coils) in her hearing aids. Her bridge buddies began to hold their bridge group in the library. She was thrilled. Meanwhile, Ed soon became director of the adjoining Geauga County, Ohio library system.

Loops Level the Field

When Ed took over the Geauga County library system, he considered it a no-brainer to have hearing loops installed in all of the branches. As he said, “This is a way to serve all the customers. These are steps to level the playing field.” Today the Geauga County libraries sport loops at their information desks, reference desks, all meeting rooms and even some small group gathering spaces. We talked with Ed, as well as Rachael Hartman, manager of the Middlefield branch in Geauga.

Gauga County has the fourth largest Amish settlement in North America. The area population is about 50 percent Amish. Typically, Amish people depend on their local bishop to decide what technologies they are allowed to use—including the use of hearing aids and cochlear implants. They do not have computers at home. The Geauga libraries are well-used by Amish citizens, some of whom use the computers to assist them in operating their businesses. Their presence is well-known in the libraries and some branches have hitching posts for their horses and buggies.

The aging population—and the library’s primary constituency—is a concern. By 2020, 30 percent of the

county residents will be over the age of 60. The library is an important resource for older community members who, according to surveys, are likely to remain in the county in their homes. Most are likely to have age-related hearing loss.

Libraries—They’re Not Just for Books Anymore

“Why do libraries need loops?” We asked. “Aren’t they supposed to be quiet?” In fact, libraries are becoming not just silent places to browse and check out books, but repositories of information and places for people to gather for community engagements and events. Library patrons ask questions and frequently seek information, whether it’s about a new book or something more complicated.

Ed mentioned that someone wanted a genealogy of their property in Geauga, when the house was built and how it changed hands. They were able to have a good conversation about the patron’s interests. Previously, Ed had helped people with hearing loss and had to go through a laborious process of writing things down, back and forth. During these written conversations, it’s possible that some helpful information was omitted along the way.

People do research, Ed explained. Sometimes their requests are simpler. They want a movie or a book and don’t remember the title. There has to be an exchange. It’s all about conversation and relationship building.

Rachael too praised the use and necessity of a looping system. “Libraries like to think of themselves as the great equalizer,” she said. “If you don’t have internet at home because you can’t afford it or if it’s not available in your area, you can come here. But there is still a barrier if you can’t communicate with the people at the library. We want to be able to help and if there’s a communication problem, that makes it more difficult.”

Activities in the library can cover many areas. They have programs sponsored by local organizations, author



Gauga County makes sure that all their signs, literature and fliers let patrons know there is a hearing loop available in their library branches.



Left: Ed Warso, director of the Geauga County, Ohio library system, saw the value hearing loops could provide for his patrons with hearing loss, including Esther Blevins.



As old as loop technology is, it still stands in stark contrast to the primary mode of transportation for many Amish people. This horse and buggy is “parked” outside the Middlefield Library in Geauga County, Ohio.



Lynn Peskoran started the library hearing loop “revolution” in Ohio’s Amish Country when researching technology to help with her mother’s hearing loss. Here Lynn (right) is pictured with her mother, Esther Blevins.

visits, and a writing group. They once had a knife sharpening presentation (without any knives) attended by 100 people. At the Henderson Library they had a knitter’s circle and chess clubs. When a model airplane club started meeting there, a hobbyist was thrilled that he could use the loop to fully engage with the group. Any one of these activities may interest someone who would miss out if they could not hear.

Rachael commented that libraries also serve as centers for information about the surrounding community. While they are not a social service agency, she said, “We want to be able to connect people to social services.”

Less People, More Loops?

In Ohio it seems that more rural areas, rather than cities, are installing induction loops in libraries. We asked Ed and Rachael about the reason for this. They came up with several speculations. It’s possible that the rural libraries, with less volume, are more aware of their patrons’ needs. Patrons are more likely to be known and noticed. In urban libraries hearing loss may not be noticed or simply not prioritized in the face of what are perceived as more pressing requirements. Also, in smaller systems it is probably easier to equip branches equally. There is also the matter of space and the concomitant cost. Large urban systems are likely to have many more desks and rooms that could benefit from loop installation.

One major point made by Lynn is the fact that, while systems seem simple, proper installation, staff training and continuous use are crucial elements. The Henderson Library essentially had to have two installations before

it was right. This does not need to happen. Also, signs indicating the presence of loops, including on fliers that advertise events, are important. Small routine tasks such as turning the systems on, making sure batteries in the microphones are working, and alerting patrons as to where to stand at information desks, are crucial to a working system. Library advocates and volunteers can take part in making sure that the details are correct and in place.

All the people interviewed for this article are innovators. Lynn’s dedication to her mother and the community led her to investigate looping. Ed’s determination to “level the playing field” for everyone led to the provision of loops. Rachael commented that when a need is known, “Why wouldn’t you address it? I can’t imagine how anybody wouldn’t, given the choice.”

If you would like to advocate for loops in your community, the HLAA website has everything you need to get started at hearingloss.org/hearing-help/technology/hat/hearing-loop-technology. **HL**

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