

Starkey Foundation's work represents its founder's lifelong philosophy

Judith Nemes

"So the world may hear" might sound like just a catchy slogan, but Bill Austin meant that literally when he launched the Starkey Hearing Foundation 23 years ago.

In fact, Austin's personal philosophy of providing hearing aids to anyone, anywhere, who needs them stretches back to his earliest days in the hearing healthcare profession. When Austin began his career in the late 1960s, distributing hearing aids and then manufacturing earmolds for dispensers, he decided from the outset that he would never turn away anyone who needed help even if the person didn't have the means to pay.



Bill and Tani Austin at the 2005 gala.

"I didn't make a lot of money first, feel guilty about it, and then decide to give something back," Austin asserted during a recent interview from Malibu, CA, where he had gone to receive an honorary doctorate (see sidebar). Instead of waiting until he accumulated wealth, from day one Austin integrated a personal philosophy into his business that no one should be denied hearing help for financial reasons.

In the early years, he told dispensers who bought the hearing aids he distributed and the earmolds he manufactured at Starkey Laboratories before it became a hearing aid company that he would donate his products free to patients if they couldn't afford to pay.

As part of the arrangement, Austin expected dispensers to provide their fitting services at no charge.

Each year, the need for such donations in the U.S. grew. In the 1970s, as Austin was rapidly building what had been a small earmold lab into America's largest hearing aid manufacturer, the company opened its first plants in Europe. At the same time, he expanded the frontiers of his philanthropic efforts as well. He began by donating hearing aids to people in the U.K. who were organizing missions to poor countries.

HOW THE FOUNDATION BEGAN

The seeds for the Starkey Hearing Foundation were sown

when Austin got a first-hand look at the scope of the need for hearing aids in poor nations around the world. "I started to travel and gained a more realistic view of the size of the problem and I knew I'd never be able to solve the problem alone," he recalls.

Therefore, in 1983, Austin established the foundation as an independent entity separate from Starkey Laboratories. He gave the staff of the non-profit organization a mandate to focus on organizing missions on a much wider scale. Since then, the foundation has given away hundreds of thousands of hearing aids around the world.

Although Austin is still principal owner and CEO of Starkey Laboratories, he says he spends most of his time on foundation work because of his core belief in helping others. He and his wife, Tani, go on about 20 mission trips a year. In the last 12 months alone, the Austins have traveled to Columbia, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Venezuela, Guatemala, and Mexico, among other countries.

Tani Austin, who serves as secretary/treasurer of the foundation, says, "Bill understands that money is leverage, but at heart he is a true missionary."

WHO'S HELPED?

About two-thirds of the foundation's work is devoted to organizing and carrying out missions abroad, while the remaining third assists Americans without the means to buy the hearing devices they need, says Frederic Rondeau, the organization's long-time international missions director.

The foundation sponsors between 100 and 150 events a year, says Rondeau, who constantly travels the globe on many of these trips. The foundation is deluged with 500 to 800 requests a year for a team to visit. To determine if a request will lead to an event, the foundation leaders devised a five-point test:

- ❖ **Professional talent and services:** What is already available in the country or what sort of talent exists that can be developed so there are people capable of providing follow-up care, reproducing the services of the mission, and pushing a hearing care program forward?
- ❖ **Infrastructure:** Are there facilities already there to assist hearing-impaired persons?
- ❖ **Equipment:** Can the team do testing with equipment that's already there?
- ❖ **Repair and follow-up:** Is there local capability to repair hearing aids and provide follow-up once the foundation team leaves?

❖ **Reinsertion into the schools:** Are there rehabilitation or social services available to get children with new hearing aids integrated back into the school system?

Each of these elements must be in place to some degree before Rondeau and his colleagues will give a green light to a mission. Some obstacles are easier to over-



Cami Lawless, an audiologist, with a client in Guatemala.

come than others. For example, the team can bring testing equipment if there isn't any available locally, but it's more challenging if there aren't any professionals or bricks and mortar facilities in the area, says Rondeau.

"Our goal is to empower local people to reproduce our knowledge and spread it in their own country so a nation can build on the momentum of what we're doing," says Rondeau passionately. He adds that the foundation will maintain contact and continue working with local representatives once the initial team has left, often for as long as 3 to 5 years.

Mission teams vary in size, depending on how many people are expected to be fitted for hearing aids at the destination, says Rondeau. Typically, a hearing care professional is identified as the leader and is asked to build a team. Many participants don't have any expertise; they may be volunteers in a church group, for example. The foundation will assist in filling any gaps of talent by tapping its extensive database of professionals who have expressed interest in traveling to help, adds Rondeau.

Since its inception, the foundation has donated hearing aids to people in about 176 nations on every continent. However, most of the sites are in Latin America, especially Mexico. Rondeau explains that's because there are many professionals already working in those countries and

there is also a great need because of the high incidence of poverty.

The single biggest challenge for the foundation is sending mission trips to Africa, says Rondeau. Because of civil warfare and fatal diseases like AIDS and malaria rampant in many African countries, the need for hearing aids is much further down on the priority list, he notes sadly. What's more, there's virtually no infrastructure or personnel to successfully complete an event in most of those nations, he adds.

"We can't look back and feel bad about the missions we can't do," says Rondeau, who is an eternal optimist. "We keep every request on file and we're always trying to go to places where we initially denied a trip."

For example, the foundation turned down a request from Turkey a few years ago because of a lack of facilities and equipment for meaningful follow-up. But, says Rondeau, because of recent progress in that country, the foundation has placed Turkey on its calendar and trips to Istanbul and Ankara are slated for later this year.

On the domestic front, the Starkey Foundation gives away thousands of hearing aids each year and enlists the *pro bono* services of about 3500 hearing care professionals in the U.S. to donate their ser-

vices in fitting them. Last year, says Rondeau, 7900 children and adults in the U.S. received free hearing aids through the foundation's Hear Now program. Federal poverty guidelines are used to determine qualification.

Rondeau emphasized, "Hearing professionals don't have to sell Starkey products to participate. This is really about helping kids."

GALA IS MAIN FUNDRAISER

Since 2001, much of the funding for the missions has come from the foundation's annual "So the World May Hear" Awards Gala in St. Paul, MN, not far from Eden Prairie, MN, where both the foundation and Starkey Laboratories are based. The charitable function has quickly become renowned for attracting big-name performers and other celebrities from sports, business, and other areas. Rondeau and Debbie Wright, the foundation's executive director, credit Tani Austin with being the driving force behind the idea of organizing a star-studded event to raise money for the foundation and boost awareness of its cause.

The first year, about 800 people attended the gala, and it raised \$600,000, says Wright. Since then, the event has grown in

PEPPERDINE MAKES HIM DR. WILLIAM F. AUSTIN

William F. Austin has received many awards for his philanthropic work with the Starkey Hearing Foundation as well as for his achievement in turning Starkey from a small earmold company into the largest hearing aid maker in the country and the world's leading maker of custom hearing instruments.

His latest tribute came on July 6, when Pepperdine University presented him with an honorary doctor of laws degree during graduation ceremonies at its Malibu campus. Austin also delivered the commencement speech for the Graduate School of Education and Psychology.

In announcing the honorary degree, Pepperdine said, "Mr. Austin has guided Starkey Laboratories with a sincere respect for the individual, always placing the client first. His primary concern for his clients led him to pioneer numerous customer service innovations, many of which have become common practice in the hearing aid industry."

Among past honors, Austin has received Humanitarian of the Year awards from both the National Association for Home Care and Hospice and Variety International. Possibly his most treasured accolade is a personal letter of thanks from Mother Theresa for his help in India.



Austin was honored by Pepperdine.



Dionne Warwick, who sang at the 2006 gala, is a strong advocate for the foundation.

scale and visibility each year, especially after Elton John gave a concert at the 2004 gala. That event raised \$2.7 million and “really put us on the map,” says Wright, who is involved yearlong in planning the gala.

This year’s event, held on June 17, raised a record \$4.2 million, with the help of Jay Leno, host of *The Tonight Show*, who headlined the event. Other stars who performed that evening included Dionne Warwick, Kathy Sledge, and John Mellencamp. Many of the celebrities who have attended the foundation’s galas are people whom Bill Austin has personally fitted with hearing aids. Others were motivated to help the cause after meeting the Austins at other charitable functions.

For example, Bill and Tani were among the underwriters of Dionne Warwick’s 45th Anniversary Concert at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles in January, where they met the singer for the first time. Warwick, who performed her hit *That’s What Friends Are For* at this year’s gala, told *The Hearing Journal* that she appeared because “I was impressed with the work they did in their foundation.”

Warwick, who has traveled to Africa on behalf of the U.S. to raise awareness of the AIDS crisis there, has long been concerned with the less fortunate. She has agreed to be a spokesperson for the Starkey Foundation in future efforts in Africa and South America.

The lion’s share of money raised at the gala comes from attendees who bid for the privilege of joining one of the mission teams, says Wright. Many of those who bid in the auction are hearing professionals, but participation in missions is not

reserved for hearing care experts.

Last year, for example, country singer Tricia Yearwood performed at the gala and her husband, the country legend Garth Brooks, donated \$250,000 to reserve a spot on a mission trip. Yearwood has already gone on two missions to Mexico and may join a team going to South Africa later this year, Wright says.

Places on about 15 mission teams were auctioned off this year for 2006 trips to sites including Turkey, Peru, South Africa, and Mexico.

THE REWARDS ARE PRICELESS

Long before the Starkey Foundation Gala became a hot ticket, hearing healthcare professionals have been joining the Austins and other team members on mission trips around the globe.

Jerry Smith, BC-HIS, who owns Hearing Unlimited, based in Ames, IA, went on his first mission to Ecuador about a decade ago. Since then, he and his wife, Judy, an audiologist, have gone with the foundation to locations that include Peru, Vietnam, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

“I saw the trips as a way of giving something back to the hearing impaired since this business has been good to us for many years,” says Smith. “At the beginning there was no real publicity for these trips. But Bill [Austin] and I have been friends for more than 30 years, and we went because he needed professionals to help.”

Like all the other volunteers, the Smiths worked hard on those trips,

Lori McCorry feels the joy of helping during a mission trip in Colombia.



Jerry Smith, seen here this year in Guatemala, has been going on Starkey missions for many years. Indeed, the whole Smith family supports the cause, including his wife, Judy; daughter Cami Lawless; sons Mike and Jeff; and Jeff’s wife, Sharon.

and for no money. But, he says, the rewards are well worth it. He explains, “You take a 12-year-old kid and a half hour after fitting him with a hearing aid, he says ‘papa’ for the first time ever. If that doesn’t melt you a bit, you’re made of stone.”

Lori McCorry, AuD, an audiologist at Audiological Consultants of Atlanta, went on her first Starkey-sponsored mission trip last December to Cali, Colombia. She and the team, which included the Austins and Rondeau and his wife, Carla (an audiologist who is clinical director of the foundation), worked 8 to 14 hours a day and dispensed hearing aids to more than 750 people over a 5-day period.

“It really opens your eyes to meet people who don’t have a lot, but were very grateful for our help,” McCorry recalls. She found the experience so rewarding, she is committed to future mission work, possibly closer to home. She notes, “We often aren’t aware of the poverty that exists right here in the U.S. There is a need for hearing aids here too.”

FOUNDATION’S FUTURE: MISSIONS AND MORE

Bill Austin says that the groundwork has been laid for the Starkey Foundation to continue in perpetuity long after he’s gone. The foundation is adding more dimensions to its commitment to assisting the poor in getting hearing devices.

For example, it recently began working with Lift Up America, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that donates goods to residents of poor communities in this country. The Starkey Foundation has agreed to donate hearing aids to the group, which will dispense them as part of its community assistance efforts.

Austin expects partnerships with other organizations to evolve in the future.

“We’re a rough diamond that’s now being polished,” he says.

However, Austin emphasizes that the mission trips will always be the central focus of the foundation because that’s what it does best. “The work we do on those trips is what we can give back to the world because we want to make a difference in hearing,” he says with conviction.

For more information, visit the foundation’s web site at www.sotheworldmayhear.org.