In the *(hearing)* loop

Bestselling psychology textbook author David Myers is teaching his largest audience yet, through a national campaign to provide cutting-edge technology to people with hearing loss.

BY CHRISTOPHER MUNSEY

Monitor staff

In 1999, as David Myers, PhD, stood in the stone sanctuary of an 800-year-old Scottish abbey, he struggled to hear the words of a religious service. All he got through his hearing aid was a wash of indecipherable noise, as the pastor's amplified voice reverberated in the ancient vaulted space.

Just as Myers was about to give up, his wife noticed a blue sign with a white ear, a slash mark and a "T" in the bottom right corner — indicating that the church offered a "hearing loop." Common in the United Kingdom, hearing loops directly broadcast amplified sound to hearing aids.

Myers pressed a button on his own hearing aid and stood amazed as the person's words became instantly clear.

"It was like going from a rough gravel road to fresh asphalt, cognitively," he says.

From that moment on, Myers, a psychology professor at Hope College in Holland, Mich., began advocating for hearing loops in the United States so that more of the 36 million adults in the United States experiencing some degree of hearing loss can better hear any type of amplified presentation in a large space, from the prayers at a worship service to the dialogue at a movie.

In his articles and talks, Myers argues that existing systems for people with hearing loss — which predominantly broadcast

doctorate in social psychology at the University of Iowa in 1967 and started a teaching and research career. He loved teaching, but understanding students' questions got harder and harder, and faculty committee meetings grew more frustrating. To expand his teaching, Myers turned to writing textbooks. The first edition of his introductory psychology textbook "Psychology" was published in 1986.

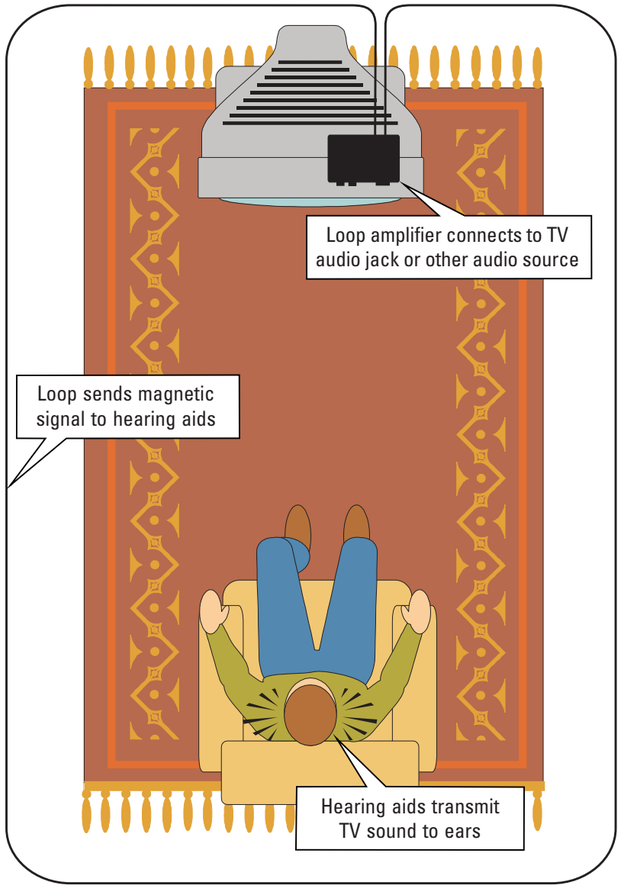
Myers's advocacy for hearing loops in the United States began in his hometown of Holland and the adjoining community of Zeeland in western Michigan. He brought together religious leaders, audiologists, school and civic officials and business leaders to hear about the devices. His pitch combined information, altruism and self-interest. He argued that people with hearing loss would enjoy a better quality of life if the loops were widely installed, and that businesses could make their customers happier. "The argument is, wouldn't you like more customers from among America's population with hearing loss?" he says.

That campaign successfully looped 80 places of worship, 16 businesses, auditoriums at local schools and colleges and the senior center, community center and City Hall council chambers, then spread to Grand Rapids, where the city's convention center, airport and many houses of worship are now looped. Myers also launched www.hearingloop.org, to publicize the benefits of hearing loops. He traveled around the country to speak to civic and hearing advocacy groups. He also lobbied hearing aid manufacturers to include a magnetic telecoil receptor in all new models of hearing aids to make the devices compatible with loop systems.

Myers's advocacy gained further momentum last year, when the Hearing Loss Association of America joined with the American Academy of Audiology to launch a national educational campaign called "Get in the Hearing Loop."

Myers deserves all the credit for developing the argument for why hearing loop systems should be much more widely installed in public spaces, says Brenda Battat, executive director of the Hearing Loss Association of America. "He's chosen this as something he's going to make happen, on a very wide scale, and it is. It's picking up."

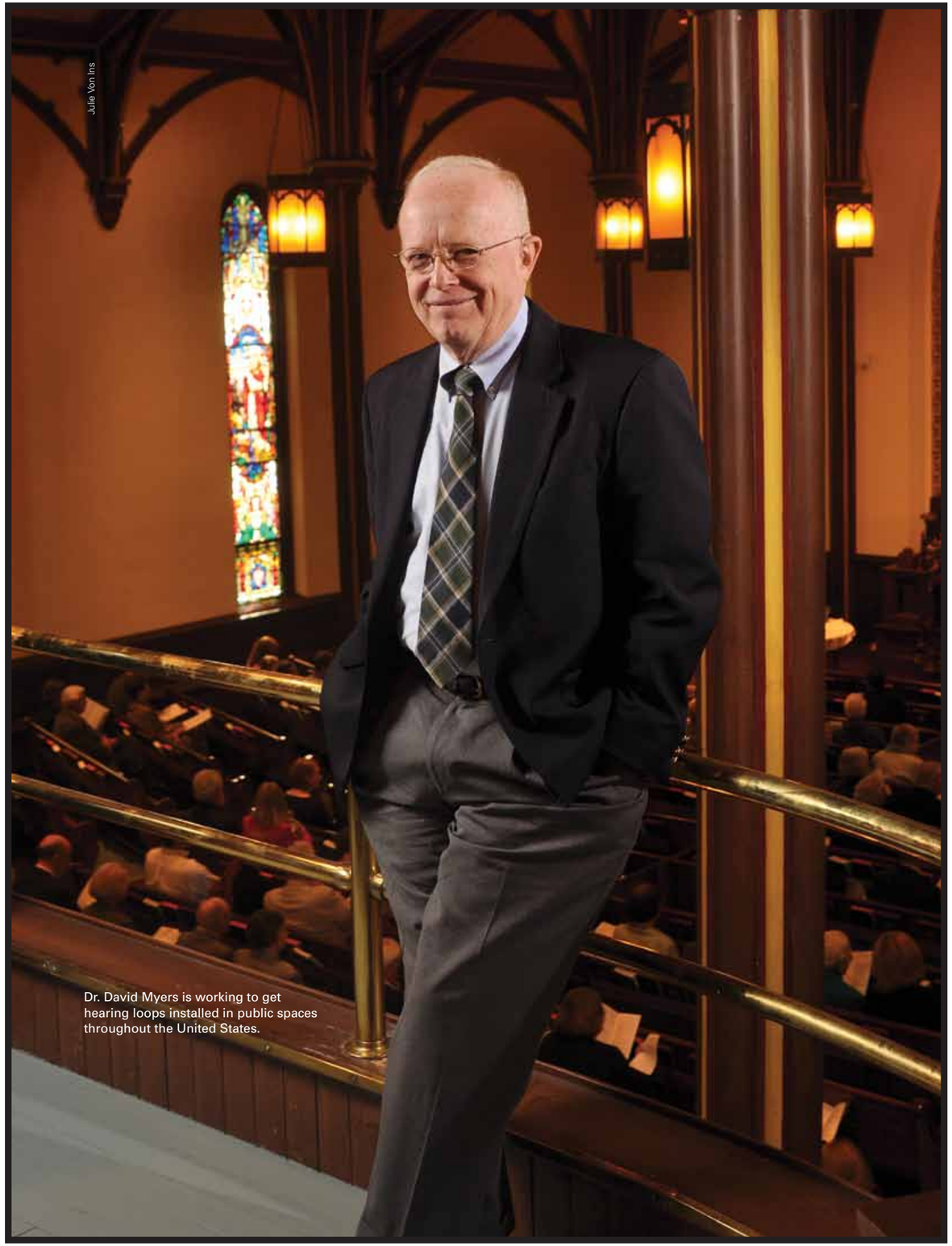
How the hearing loop works



Now that he's made his hometown hearing-loop friendly, Myers wants everyone dealing with hearing loss to enjoy the same benefit. "Is there any reason why we in the U.S. can't have this technology?" he asks. ■

To hear a demonstration of the difference a hearing loop makes to a person using a hearing aid, go to www.hearingloop.org/SoundDemo.html.

More information about hearing loops is also available at www.hearingloss.org/content/get-hearing-loop.



Dr. David Myers is working to get hearing loops installed in public spaces throughout the United States.

FM or infrared signals to headphones — are inconvenient and ineffective. In a movie theater, for example, people who struggle to hear need to get headsets from employees, check them out and return to their seats. By contrast, a hearing loop system transmits directly to hearing aids and requires only the push of a button for people to tune in.

"Put yourself in the position of a person with hearing loss," Myers says. "Which of these two systems are you more likely to use?"

Hearing loops transmit magnetic energy to hearing aids through a wire that surrounds an audience. The loops work in small areas — such as the back seats of all London taxis — as well as very large areas, such as the 12,200 fixed seats in Michigan State University's basketball arena. "That's part of the beauty of the technology," says Myers. Typical costs for installing them range from $2,000 to $8,000 for small to medium-sized worship centers, but more for very large facilities with lots of embedded steel.

Myers emphasizes that hearing loops are more effective because they deliver sound customized by one's hearing aids for one's particular hearing needs. In the United Kingdom, the law mandates public facilities to be equipped with hearing assistive technology, and many sites have opted for hearing loops. The devices are also used throughout Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland.

Why hasn't the technology been embraced in the United States? While the Americans with Disabilities Act requires public facilities to have assistive listening systems for people with hearing loss, most places — such as movie theaters — comply by relying on FM or infrared systems, which are easier to install.

"American AV installers have opted for the easier 'plug-and-play' FM or infrared listening systems that don't require running a wire around an audience," says Myers. "When the contractor tries [the system] with a headset, the sound output seems fine to them. They fail to consider what human factors psychology emphasizes: the need to design technology with real human users in mind."

But that might be slowly changing, thanks in part to Myers's advocacy. Since 2002, Myers has helped spark local hearing loop efforts across communities in Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, New Mexico, Wisconsin and New York City.

Last year, the American Academy of Audiology, the national professional association representing audiologists, joined the Hearing Loss Association of America, the advocacy organization for people with hearing loss, to launch a national awareness campaign promoting hearing loops and hearing loop-compatible hearing aids. The campaign was funded in part by Myers's family's charitable foundation.

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Making public spaces more accessible for people with hearing aids reduces the social isolation so many of them feel when they go to public events but can't understand what's being said, says Michael Harvey, PhD, a psychologist who specializes in the treatment of people who grew up without hearing and adults who lost their hearing late in life. "It takes a lot of work, but it is possible to convince, fund and make hearing loops become national," he says. "Psychologically, it's hugely, hugely important," he says.

A growing need

Myers started losing his hearing as a teen, due to a genetic condition that gradually eroded his ability to hear low-frequency sounds. He started using a hearing aid in his early 40s, and within a few years, couldn't function professionally without one.

Despite the slow loss of his hearing, Myers earned a