

Now hear this: Used hearing aids help others hear better

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Blount County residents can help a little-known, nonprofit program just by giving away something they no longer use. In turn, that deed can help others dealing with economic hardships to hear better.

Blount County Hearing and Speech Foundation collects used hearing aids from the public and can either recycle them for the needy or get credit from a manufacturer. Megan Smith, executive director of the Hearing and Speech Foundation, said the foundation accepts any type of hearing aids. "No matter whether they are broken, battered or shattered, we can use them," she said.

Smith said the organization has, for many years, accepted used hearing aids. It's only recently that she has decided to actively seek donations.

"With current economic climate, instead of stirring up (monetary) donations, we are asking for recycled hearing aids," she said. "If we can't refit them immediately, we can send them back to the manufacturer for credit."

Jaime Graham this week received a donated pair of hearing aids from the foundation. The Townsend resident can now hear well enough to carry on a conversation with more than one person at a time, something she hasn't done in her 32 years of life.

"I can't even begin to explain how wonderful it is," Graham said of her improved hearing. "I am able to hear everything now, which will take a lot to get used to."

Graham said she started wearing hearing aids at age 10, but decided she couldn't play on the playground without them falling out, so she stopped wearing them. In 2003, she again started wearing one, which did help, but produced a background noise that hampered what she heard.

Her new, custom-fitted hearing aids will not fall out, she said. The day she received her new hearing aids, Graham said she was able to communicate with her co-workers and customers.

"Without the hearing aids, I had been isolated. I could have one-on-one conversations but not talk in a group," she said. "I can't wait to get out there and experience new noises. I look forward to talking to people. I am actually thinking about going back to school again."

Graham had completed training as a medical technician quite a few years ago, but could not pursue a career because she couldn't hear patients well enough to take vital signs.

Manufacturing credit

Recently, Smith said hearing aids collected over a year and recently sent to Starkey, a hearing aid manufacturer, garnered \$3,000 in credit. The credit, Smith said, is used to repair more modern hearing aids so they can be used. Hearing aid repairs run about \$100 each.

Dr. Caroline Roberts, audiologist for Blount Hearing and Speech Services Inc., Maryville, said if the donated hearing aid is a behind-the-ear style, it can be reprogrammed and refit to the new patient's specifications.

In-the-ear style aids, Roberts said, require a little more work, because they are custom-fitted to a person's ears. When this happens, Roberts said Henry Meltsner of Widex Hearing Aid Company in New York will make new casings for any old Widex hearing aids, free of charge, using a mold, or impression, of the new patient's ears.

Not only did Graham receive remanufactured hearing aids, she also helped others by donating her used ones.

"It felt really good," she said. "It was nice to know I could give something that someone else can use down the road."

531 patients

Blount County Hearing and Speech Foundation currently provides support for 531 patients in 23 East Tennessee counties who are living at or below the poverty level set forth by the federal government.

"We do have an application process that verifies they do live in East Tennessee and are in need of our help, (using the guidelines)" Smith said. "Some of the families we provide for have two or three people with hearing aids."

Hearing aids, much like eyeglasses, are not often covered by insurance. Smith said a good digital hearing aid costs anywhere between \$1,500 and \$6,000. That's why donations of any type, style or condition of hearing aids are important,

she added.

Hearing aids generally come from two different sources: from those donating their old hearing aids after purchasing new ones, or from family members who donate aids after a loved one dies.

Anyone donating hearing aids will receive a tax receipt indicating their contribution, though Smith said the foundation cannot determine a value on it.

Those wanting to donate used hearing aids in any condition should drop them off at the office or mail to 617 E. Broadway Maryville, TN 37804-9925. In rare cases, community members may call 977-0981 to arrange for pickup. SCIBSCIB

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