



All about helping

Businesses receive Mayor's Award for focus on serving disabled

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The 10th annual Mayor's Awards honored three local businesses that made a concerted effort to accommodate employees and customers with disabilities.

Otojoy, The Lobero Theatre and DuPont Displays received awards from Mayor Helene Schneider on Wednesday at a breakfast in the Cabrillo Pavilion Arts Center.

The outstanding effort award went to Otojoy, a local company founded by Thomas Kaufmann that specializes in hearing loop design and installation.

"With hearing loop, we can transform a frustrating experience into a breathtaking one," Mr. Kaufmann said. "When people told me I had changed their lives, and when I saw people bursting into tears because of the profound impact hearing loop has had on them, I was hooked."

A person with hearing aids can switch on a T-coil, a tiny device in their aids, and receive audio from magnetic waves generated by a wire loop that runs under the floor of a room, cutting out extra noise.

Otojoy promotes Loop Santa Barbara, a campaign to spread hearing loop technology. Since its establishment 2½ years ago, Otojoy has installed loops in more than 20 venues throughout the city.

The Lobero Theatre received the design accessibility award for last year's renovations that made



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Representing the winners of the 10th annual Mayor's Awards are, from left, Thomas Kaufmann, founder of Otojoy, for Outstanding Effort; Mary Tremel, site manager for DuPont Displays, for Employment/Accommodation; and David Asbell, executive director of the Lobero Theatre Foundation, for Design/Accessibility.

the theater friendlier to those with mobile and hearing disabilities.

"We were going to take the seats up, that allowed us to reveal the floor, so that we could redo the rake of it and make it more accessible; and also allowed us to do some work with air flow and air conditioning," said Executive Director David Asbell.

Some of the larger renovations include additional wheelchair seating, enlarged accessible rest rooms, and a hearing aid loop in the auditorium.

"It was all donated. We raised the money to do it, and it was about a \$7 million budget," Mr. Asbell said.

The employment accommodation award went to DuPont Display, a research and development company, for its reflection of the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act employment practices.

DuPont did whatever it took to retain a now 12-year employee, Cherie Alvarez, and help her do her job despite her hearing loss.

Mrs. Alvarez, a Santa Barbara na-

tive who at age 22 was diagnosed with hereditary nerve deafness, was the keynote speaker Wednesday.

The progressive hearing loss has worsened over the past 27 years, but Mrs. Alvarez said her life changed dramatically when she received cochlear implants in 2012 and regained about 90 percent of her hearing.

Her two goals now are to hold a local hearing health expo to raise awareness about hearing loss and

Please see **AWARDS** on **A8**

Otojoy, The Lobero, DuPont Displays honored

AWARDS

Continued from Page A1

to start an education program in schools that teaches children how to protect their hearing.

Of people 6 to 19 years old, 12.5 percent have some form of noise-induced hearing loss, Mrs. Alvarez said. About 48 million U.S. adults, 20 percent of the population, have a form of hearing loss.

Mrs. Alvarez's hearing loss is genetic. Luckily, it stops with her, as her 12-year-old twin daughters have tested negative for the gene.

She described how her hearing loss affected her parenting.

"What became challenging for me, was when my daughters started to talk, and at that point I relied heavily on lip reading. Parenting is a multi-tasking job. It was hard for me, because I couldn't hear and do anything else at the same time."

By 2005, hearing aids weren't enough anymore.

"I got by on the job with email and such great co-workers."

When offered a promotion at DuPont, conference calls became a regular part of work, for which she requested a captionist.

Despite managing the hearing loss at work, Mrs. Alvarez often found herself alone especially at large group gatherings or school functions.

"It got to the point where I would stand at my daughters' school assemblies by myself and people didn't even try to talk to me anymore because they knew I couldn't understand," she said.

"My world was becoming smaller."

The deciding moment to get cochlear implants came after a conversation Mrs. Alvarez had with her daughter, who was crying and explaining something that happened at school.

Mrs. Alvarez couldn't understand her daughter, and after many interruptions in the conversation, her daughter said, "You know what, mom? Just forget it."

"I thought 'This is the end for me. My daughters are 9, and I have a lot of talking to do with them in the years to come,'" Mrs. Alvarez said.

She talked with her husband and faced her fear of cochlear implants in 2012. The first was placed in her left ear, which had 1 percent understanding with hearing aids at that time. It was a success. She then received an implant in her right ear, which had been her good ear with 14 percent understanding.

"It was incredible what I was hearing," she said. "I heard the birds outside, which I hadn't heard in years. I could hear crickets. I could hear beeping. We have a lot of things in our world that beep."

Progressive hearing loss has worsened over the past 27 years, but Mrs. Alvarez said her life changed dramatically when she received cochlear implants in 2012 and regained about 90 percent of her hearing.

She realized that she had lost a lot of social skills through years of hearing loss. With her hearing restored, some of the depression and loneliness subsided.

Mrs. Alvarez attributes much of her success to organizations that have helped her through the years: The Independent Living Resource Center, the Department of Rehabilitation, and the Santa Barbara chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America, of which she is now president.

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