

Grand Rapids event advocates help for the hearing-impaired

by Matt Vande Bunte | The Grand Rapids Press

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Bill Barkeley refuses to let a hearing impairment get him down. In fact, two years ago he climbed Africa's 19,340-foot Mount Kilimanjaro.

Sure, the Grand Rapids man once featured on ABC-TV's "Good Morning America" needed assistive technology to communicate with his guide.

But that is his point.

"While we can't solve all hearing problems today, there is a lot of resources and technology that people can get to bridge the gap," said Barkeley, 47, who has 85 percent hearing loss. "The mountain is just a metaphor for your own life."

Barkeley is one of the scheduled speakers Monday at the fifth anniversary celebration of the Grand Rapids chapter of the Hearing Loss Association of America.

The event is scheduled from 10 a.m. to noon Monday June 15 at the JW Marriott Hotel, 235 Louis St. NW, Grand Rapids, Michigan and is open to the public.

Spearheaded by former Wolverine World Wide Inc. executive Vic Krause, with financial support from Amway Corp. co-founder Richard DeVos, the local chapter strives to educate people about hearing loss and make them aware of what can be done about it.

The chapter Monday will honor DeVos and Hope College professor David Myers, author of "A Quiet Life: Living with Hearing Loss" and advocate of induction loop technology that wires buildings to transmit sound directly to hearing aids.

Barkeley, whose type 2 Usher syndrome also is making him progressively blind, will talk about his mountaintop trek. He wears a hearing aid in each ear and uses a microphone system to help him hear in group settings.

"The average person waits over 10 years before they do something about their hearing loss," said Barkeley, who works in marketing at Steelcase Inc. and speaks around the world on hearing loss. "It creates a lot of consequences in terms of isolation, depression and the unwillingness to sometimes get out there and get involved."

An estimated 30 million Americans suffer some level of hearing loss. The open house will include a demonstration of a hearing loop and several other hearing products will be on display to help visitors "learn what's out there," spokeswoman Heidi McCrary said.