

Local organization helps people with hearing loss

By Evelyn Pham

Coping with a hearing loss can be a difficult process. Learning how to communicate and adjusting to a different lifestyle presents certain challenges, but the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association is working hard to ensure that those with a hearing impairment have help.

"Statistics show that one in 10 Canadians have some kind of hearing impairment, but now it's moving up to one in eight," according to Marilyn Kingdon, president of the Edmonton Branch of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association (CHHA).

She credits this rise to Canada's aging population and the increased number of youth who are exposed to loud music such as portable music players and concerts.

"We don't say no to them," Kingdon stated recently. "We do say turn down the volume."

The group provides education, support and advocacy for persons who are hard of hearing. Sign language and speech reading classes, a young adults committee and a hearing aid assistance fund are just a few of the many services the

Canadian Hard of Hearing Association offers.

There was a time when an organization providing so many services didn't exist in Edmonton.

Kingdon remembers that there was an informal group for hard-of-hearing seniors when she came to Edmonton 17 years ago, but no recognized organization dedicated to the cause.

A former board member of the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association in Calgary, Kingdon felt it would be beneficial to belong to a national organization, and others agreed.

"We incorporated in 1997 under CHHA Edmonton," she said. "The senior group became members of CHHA Edmonton and some of those seniors still meet today for a senior's speech reading session on Wednesday afternoons."

Regular activities include general meetings and American Sign Language and speech reading classes. Fundraisers take place throughout the year, with an important casino scheduled for December.

The group works to educate the public about hearing impairments

and raising awareness of issues that affect hard-of-hearing people.

Lack of communication access is one of the many obstacles this group strives to overcome.

Although TTY, also known as text telephone, is now available for many businesses, organizations and phone services such as Edmonton's 211, challenges remain.

A major success has been the Communication Access Real-time Communication (CART) initiative. CART closed captioning and/or American Sign Language interpretation are now available at all major city events and meetings, and by request for others.

Edmonton implemented the initiative in the fall of 2005 – the first city in Canada to do so.

"One of our proudest moments was the implementation of CART," said Kingdon.

It's an amazing accomplishment when you consider that the CHHA Edmonton branch is almost entirely run by volunteers, including Kingdon herself. There are only two part-time paid staff members.

"If we don't have enough volunteers to run our casinos or work our table at fairs or conferences that limits what we can do," Kingdon noted. "Without them, we couldn't do very much."

Faced with limited funds and resources, and a greater demand for their services, the CHHA is feeling the heat, like many other volunteer-run nonprofits.

"The Canadian Hard of Hearing Association is providing a valuable service to the community yet operating with just a few resources," remarked Janice Bell, director of

Volunteer Edmonton. "It's unfortunate that making do with less is all too common in the nonprofit sector."

Kingdon explained that about 90 per cent of their volunteers have a hearing impairment, but first-hand experience with hearing loss isn't necessary.

"We don't discriminate," she said with a laugh.

Anyone 18 or over can volunteer. Volunteers help out in a variety of roles – from serving on the board and fundraising, to attending trade fairs and organizing special events

and activities.

To learn more about the Canadian Hard of Hearing Association, Edmonton Branch and their services, or how you can become involved as a volunteer, call 780-428-6622 (voice or TTY), visit their website at <http://members.shaw.ca/chha-ed>, e-mail chha-ed@shaw.ca or fax 780-420-6661. To visit the national website, check out www.chha.ca.

Evelyn Pham is communications coordinator of Volunteer Edmonton. For more information contact her at 780-732-6655 or go to www.volunteeredmonton.com.

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