

J. B. Robillard: 2012 Mission for the Starkey Hearing Foundation to China

On April 10, 2013 the Ottawa Chapter of the Canada China Friendship Society gathered for a presentation by J. B. Robillard, President of Robillard Hearing Centres. The presentation described the 2012 mission of the Starkey Hearing Foundation to China.

JB, as he is known, described how his business relationship with Starkey Hearing Technologies, a manufacturer for hearing aids, evolved to the point where he and his wife were invited to be part of a Canadian Team that flew to China to provide and install 6,500 hearing aids for mostly poor Chinese children.

JB found inspiration in the life work of Bill Austin, the Founder of Starkey Hearing Technologies. Mr. Austin, a hearing aid technologist, started his hearing aid business in 1970 in his garage. The business has grown dramatically. Today with 3,500 employees Starkey is the only major independent North American manufacturer of hearing aids, and the only privately owned hearing aid manufacturer of any scale. More than 5.5 million people are wearing Starkey hearing aids.

In 1984 Bill Austin, described as a practical and passionate man, created the Starkey Hearing Foundation, a charity with the premise: "Alone we can't do much, but together we can change the world." At this year's Clinton Global Initiative (CGI) Annual Meeting, he reported on the "So the World May Hear" Commitment to Action: to give one million people hearing aids this decade to restore the gift of hearing, and to make a difference in people's lives.

Starkey Hearing Foundation's national USA programs and global missions are focussed initiatives to enable the world to hear, one by one and community by community. The foundation believes hearing is the answer to many of the world's most intractable problems: isolation, poverty, and illiteracy.

Mr. Austin has long since retired from the daily management of Starkey Hearing Technologies and devotes himself full time on the Foundation's programmes. The foundation's annual target is to provide and install 100,000 hearing aids a year to the poor people around the world. To do this they need not only hearing aids but also trained professional audiologists and technical experts, like JB and his wife, to correctly fit the hearing aids. It was this challenge and opportunity that drew the Robillards to the Canadian team and the mission to China.

The mission to China was described as the first charitable mission to China that has been officially sanctioned by the PRC. It was in large measure a joint effort with the Government of China. Mrs. Tao from the Association for the Disabled was a tireless and determined leader of the Chinese side. She cleared away the bureaucratic obstacles and put in place the Chinese support. The Chinese recruited potential recipients, arranged for initial audiology tests, and supported the establishment of a Starkey follow-up team that will support the recipients and maintain the hearing aids over time.

In August 2012, the Canadian Team arrived in Hong Kong and spent 2 days adjusting to the time difference before heading to Beijing, Xian, and Chengdu for the clinics where they installed 6,500 hearing aids. The hearing aids themselves are typically older models that have been donated by their previous users and refurbished by Starkey. Funding for the Foundation is raised through charitable donations, many of which are made at an annual gala. Other prominent charities support the Starkey Foundation (e.g. Pros for Africa, World Serve Foundation, and Clinton Foundation) and some such as the

NBA CARES joined the China mission. It was noted that the members of the Canadian Team contributed not only their time and expertise; they also paid the cost of their transportation to China.

The mission was warmly received by the Chinese officials in every city they visited, and many evenings included a banquet and entertainment.

To convey the excitement and passion generated by the mission to China, JB showed 2 videos. You can see one of these videos at this URL <http://www.starkeyhearingfoundation.org/> Click on the video on the top right of the page. For many of the children in the film this is the first time in their life that they have had hearing. It is a joyous and emotional time for them and for their parents. For the older people, some of whom had not had effective hearing for over a decade, it was a miracle.

In China the gift of hearing for a child can be the difference between being classified as disabled, ostracized and shunted into second tier life with very limited educational and employment opportunities; and the prospects of normal fully integrated life.

While the successful Starkey mission has opened the door to further progress in dealing with loss of hearing in China there is still a long way to go. For these 6,500 fortunate recipients of hearing aids there is a need for maintenance, batteries and inevitably replacement when they break or wear out. The Starkey Foundation has left behind a network to provide this support. In addition, it is estimated that there are a further 28 million Chinese who suffer from impaired hearing. For some this loss of hearing is due to a congenital defect, but for many other it is the result of poorly treated childhood disease and infections of the middle ear. Bringing hearing to these millions remains a challenge for the future.

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