

WOODSTICK 2008

AIMS TO BREAK WORLD RECORD

BY ELIZABETH THOMPSON



The Seattle Seahawks Drum Line rattles the rafters at Woodstick 2007 to raise funds for hearing research.

Photo courtesy of Don Doman

Imagine 533 drummers in one place, drumsticks moving in a blur as they beat away. Even those who are deaf will feel the vibrations and energy. Those who are not need to have earplugs handy! That imagery will give you an inkling of the passion one man has for making hair cell regeneration research successful.

Gene Pankey, 72, was born deaf in one ear and with hearing loss in the other. At present, a hearing aid makes communication possible but his speech recognition is less than 45 percent. Regardless, Pankey does not shy away from life or difficult circumstances. Rather he moves forward with an internal energy that will benefit millions.

For 25 years, Pankey has been an

active member of Clover Park Rotary in Washington State. His efforts to raise awareness and money for hair cell regeneration research began full force one day in April 2001. He and his wife Margaret were invited to attend a luncheon for a small group at Virginia Merrill Bloedel Hearing Research Center.

“We were seated next to Dr. George Gates, then director of the

Center, and Dr. Edwin Rubel, a lead scientist who is credited with discovering that birds regenerate their hearing in 30 days or less after loss,” Pankey recalls. “Dr. Rubel said that \$50 million over a seven to 10-year period was needed to attract other scientists and to set up five or six new laboratories that would research areas they don’t have the funds for right now. For example, a lab that specializes in understanding cell division.”

The presentations moved Pankey to ask Drs. Gates and Rubel if Rotary was doing anything for them. Their response of “no” was all he needed to hear.

Pankey proposed to his fellow Rotary Club members that they help out. Certainly they sensed his enthusiasm as Pankey recalls, “I had a committee right off the bat with good moral support.” As part of their efforts they started promoting Woodstick (www.woodstick2007.com), a fundraiser idea that has been successful in the past by bringing together drummers in an attempt to beat their own Guinness World Record of 533 drummers at one time playing the same song. Woodstick 2008 is in the planning stages now and organizers are optimistic that they have a shot at establishing a new record. And Woodstick is an excellent opportunity to promote hearing health since drummers and musicians are at risk of noise-induced hearing



Gene Pankey

Photo courtesy of Render's Photography

loss.

Pankey’s Rotary Club of 60 members has raised \$33,000 to date for hearing research. Pankey has chaired “Rotarians for Hearing Regeneration: A Rotarian Action Group” for four years. The group boasts a membership of 150 and is still growing. Pankey’s local support will continue with future Woodstick events, involving 33 Rotary clubs and several Rotary districts in more than 10 countries, but Pankey aspires to making the really big impact with the Rotary Foundation.

Rotary Foundation’s current cause is eradicating polio and it has contributed \$633 million to date, with plans to match a \$100 million grant from the Gates Foundation in 2008. However, with issues like clean water and AIDS lined up to be the Foundation’s next cause,

hearing loss has stiff competition, Pankey acknowledges.

After seven years of raising funds for hearing research, Pankey reflects, “I really can’t understand why funds are so hard to raise for hearing research, given the statistics regarding the cost of hearing loss to the economy and the devastation to families and individuals who suffer with it.” Pankey says his group is in the market for a national celebrity spokesperson, one who would really go to war with them.

On his end, Pankey will keep plugging away. On your end, Pankey issues a challenge: Statistics report that there are approximately 32.5 million people with hearing loss in the United States alone. If every one of those persons with hearing loss were to put two dollars in an envelope and mail it to an organization that funds deafness research, earmarked for hair cell regeneration, the research funding dilemma would be over. ■

Gene Pankey and his wife Margaret live in Steilacoom, Wash., on Puget Sound. They have six children, 11 grandchildren and three great grandchildren. Pankey is retired from Gene Pankey Motors and is currently a director of the Northwest Commercial Bank in Lakewood and a trustee of the Tacoma Rescue Mission.

For more on the **Virginia Merrill Bloedel Hearing Research Center** at the University of Washington, visit, <http://depts.washington.edu/hearing/contact.php>.

Elizabeth Thompson is a columnist for *Suburban News Publications* and lives in Grove City, Ohio. Her book, *Day by Day, the Chronicles of a Hard of Hearing Reporter* will be published in June 2008 by Gallaudet University Press.