

Jones Beltone takes hearing help to heart

BY JORDAN MILNE

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Some people say it's bad to mix business with your personal life. For Dean Jones, owner of Jones Beltone Hearing Centers, nothing could be further from the truth. His hearing loss, which has been present most of his life, has actually improved his business.

"In high school my speech teacher noticed my hearing loss and had me move toward the front of the class," said Jones. "It was embarrassing!"

In 1947 Jones's already-bothersome hereditary hearing problem had become even more aggravated by the loud noise of the aircraft engines he serviced during World War II. He was working at a meat counter and had trouble hearing his customers.

"I was 27 years old, married and had a little girl. My wife noticed my hearing trouble and said I was missing out on many things," said Jones. "My life improved so much after buying a hearing aid."

Jones made payments of \$11 a month for his hearing aid. His life was affected so greatly by this new device that he decided to join the business.

"After the fitting for my first hearing aid, the salesman said, 'You know, you should really get into this business,'" said Jones. "Next thing I knew I received a call from the head office in Oklahoma for an interview."

For the next nine years Jones traveled around Northwest Oklahoma knocking on doors and holding hearing clinics in motel rooms. By 1956, Jones had two more children, sons David and Jim. Jones and his wife, Beverly, obtained a Beltone territory of their own in central Missouri and moved to Jefferson City.

"We started up the business in an apartment," said Jones. "My wife had three kids to look after, and I was always having to hit the road."

The first full-time Jones Beltone Hearing Center Office opened up in a corner space of the Missouri Hotel (now the Missouri Baptist Building) in 1959. By the 1970s, there were Jones Beltone branch offices in Columbia, Rolla, Mexico and Moberly as well. Each Beltone dealer is assigned a territory to avoid competition with other dealers.

By 1976 the Joneses' dealership had won every award offered by Beltone. Two years later, David Jones had joined the crew, and after two more years, Jim Jones was aboard as well.

"When I started at Jones Beltone I was getting married, and I needed a job. I grew up in the business and had no intention of getting into it," said Jim. "Working as a family has really been an asset to us. You can be honest without offending."

Honesty has always been the best policy for the Jones family when it comes to their customers (or patients) as well. Jones says he feels a deep compassion for them since he struggles with hearing loss himself.

"Sometimes when I'd test a person's hearing and the wife was with them saying, 'Oh, he doesn't really need a hearing aid,' I would put together some molding material for the spouse to place in her ear, which creates about a 30 percent temporary hearing loss," said Jones. "This helped them become more sympathetic."

It's little things like this that have kept customers loyal to Jones Beltone over the years, but the times have not passed without trials and tribulations. In the early 1990s, unfavorable publicity from slanted television investigative reports caused several hearing aid dealers to close. The Joneses managed to make it through, and by the new millennium digital hearing aids had been introduced.

"The technology has changed a great deal, and, of course, hearing aids are so much smaller. My first hearing aid was the size of a paperback book. I had it strapped to my chest with a cord going to my ear," said Jones. "The size of the device has always meant a lot to our customers. People are self-conscious about hearing problems."

From 2001 to 2006 every Jones Beltone office moved to a new and more modern location, and an additional part-time office opened in Kirksville in 2003. Recently Jones was honored for 60 years of service with Beltone Electronics Corporation at the 2007 National Beltone Convention in Orlando, Fla. He received a standing ovation from the crowd.

"When you can't hear well, you lose your personality. You feel inferior and sometimes afraid," said Jones. "I've won awards and been honored, but when I think of all the people whose lives have changed—that's the best reward."