

"I realized that sound was such a huge part of the ocean experience and until now, this had slipped so far away from me."

Tony Gring, a musician and outdoorsman who loves surfing and sail boarding, first began to notice a hearing loss in his right ear when he was in his early twenties. He was playing guitar in a rock band and assumed he was suffering a noise-induced hearing loss from his exposure to loud music. Tony had a few musician friends who'd mentioned that after years of playing live music, they were losing their hearing. "They used to say, 'Hey man, I rock so loud I'm going deaf,' almost like it was a badge of honor," Tony says. "I'm sorry to say that I bought into this way of thinking, and reasoned that some hearing loss was just part of being a musician. My inspiration for learning to play the guitar had been Jimi Hendrix, and the one time I saw him play he was really loud and the concert left my ears ringing for two days. I figured the high volume just went with the territory. No one I played with ever wore earplugs because we just didn't realize the permanent damage we might be doing to our ears."

By his mid-30s, Tony's hearing had deteriorated to the point that he began to get concerned. He'd moved to Maui, Hawaii to do more surfing and assumed the advanced hearing loss was a result of his chronic "surfer's ear." Surfer's ear is a condition of the ear canal where the bony lining under the skin develops a number of lumps (exostoses) that grow into the tube. This can eventually cause a partial or even complete blockage of the ear canal. In Tony's case, several ENT physicians in Hawaii informed him that his progressive hearing loss had not been caused by either noise exposure or surfer's ear, but was a result of a hereditary ear disorder called otosclerosis, wherein the stapes bone of the middle ear becomes locked or "fixed" and can no longer effectively transmit the vibration of sound signals past the ear drum and into the inner ear.

"I was happy that my two favorite pastimes – playing music and surfing – had not caused my

Waves

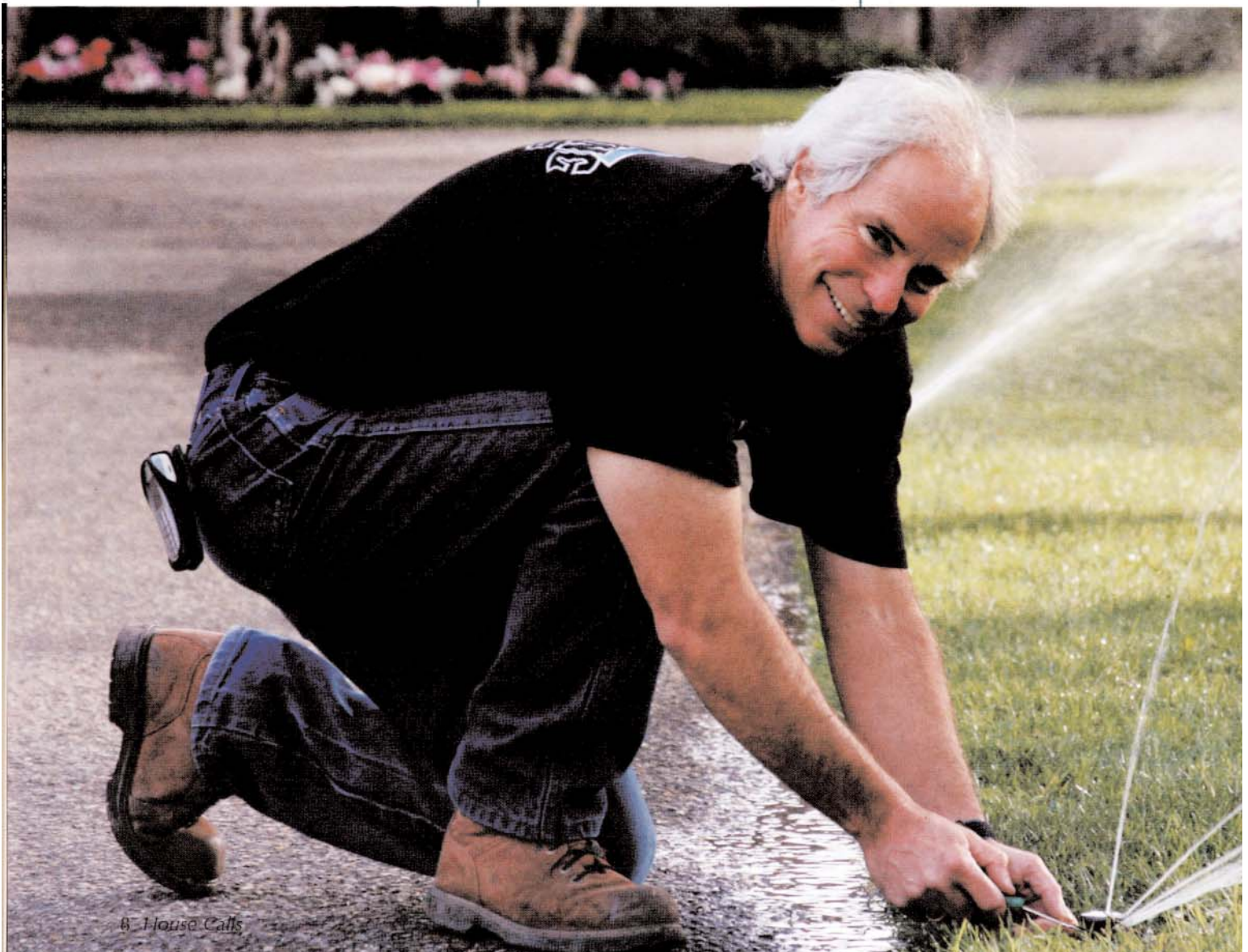
hearing loss, but I was very concerned about the diagnosis. I was told that my two treatment options were to either wear a hearing aid or get surgery to replace or free up the stapes bone," says Tony. "The thought of ear surgery frightened me a little, and I couldn't afford it anyway. And, I'm embarrassed to say that I had the notion that only old people wore hearing aids. I felt I was too young to be seen wearing a hearing aid."

Tony tried to dismiss his hearing loss altogether, and began to compensate for it by learning

to read lips and turning his better ear (the left ear) toward people speaking to catch more words of conversations. Hearing on the telephone presented a challenge and when he worked in situations where the background noise interfered with his ability to hear, he really struggled.

In 1990, Tony and his family moved back to the mainland where Tony established a landscape irrigation business in Santa Barbara, California. He decided to consult an ENT

physician in the area in the hope of getting a second opinion of the diagnosis, along with an update of current treatments. The otosclerosis diagnosis was confirmed, and hearing aids or surgery were again proposed as the two treatment options. Tony revealed his fears that wearing a hearing aid would make it obvious he had a hearing problem and he'd appear "old," to which his new physician replied, "You know what? People are going to be far more aware



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that you can't hear and more likely to perceive you as old if you don't wear a hearing aid." Tony recognized that the doctor had a point, and he agreed to be fitted for his first hearing aid at age 36. The amplification provided by the aid took some getting used to, but a year later, Tony decided to get fitted for an aid in the other ear.

Tony was happy to be hearing again, but soon learned two important lessons. Hearing aids give annoying feedback when you are playing live music, and they definitely don't mix with water. Because his landscape irrigation career involved working in and around water and sprinkler systems, he ruined more than one hearing aid. And hearing aids are not cheap. Removing his aids before working or surfing was the obvious solution to the problem, but once the aids were out of his ears, Tony was transported to a world of silence. Without being able to enjoy live music, or hear the sound of the breaking surf, or the laughing and hollering of his fellow surfers in the water, he felt isolated and disconnected from the things he loved most.

Tony's wife learned about the House Clinic and the stapes surgery for otosclerosis from a friend at work. In the stapes surgery, or stapedotomy, all or part of the stapes footplate is removed and a prosthesis is used to bypass the fixed stapes bone, allowing transmission of sound vibrations from the middle ear to the inner ear fluids. After some research on the Web sites of the

House Ear Institute and House Clinic, Tony began to get excited about the stapedotomy and the prospect of living life without hearing aids. He was still a bit fearful of undergoing surgery, but made an appointment for a hearing test and examination at the House Clinic. His first visit went well and did much to alleviate his fears. "I can honestly say that I have never felt so taken care of by a medical organization. From the time I first consulted with Dr. Ralph Nelson at the House Clinic about a stapedotomy in my left ear to just yesterday, when I saw Dr. Rick Friedman for my post-op consultation following the stapedotomy in my right ear, I've been treated so warmly," says Tony. "From the start, I've felt confident and secure in the ear surgeons and the procedure itself, as well as the audiologists, surgical counselors and staff."

Tony's first surgery took place at St. Vincent Medical Center in 2000 and his second in 2004. He finds it interesting that the Doheny Wing, which the hospital currently uses as operating rooms for House Clinic ear surgeons, used to be the obstetrics ward where Tony was

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The two neurotologists who treated Mr. Gring at the House Clinic were Ralph Nelson, M.D., now retired, and Rick A. Friedman, M.D., Ph.D. Dr. Friedman shares Tony's love of surfing and the ocean, and understood his wish for a second stapedotomy so that he could hear the sounds of the sea in "full stereo."

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born in 1954. "My first stapedotomy took place in the exact same room where I was born," says Tony. "I think that's very fitting, since you could say my ear was reborn that day and I regained my hearing."

Tony's life changed significantly after his stapedotomy procedures. He became more involved in conversations because he was able to catch all that was being said. He no longer had to worry about the practical problem of removing his hearing aids to avoid water damage. He no longer had to deal with feedback from his hearing aids when he was playing with his band, and

he could enjoy his acoustic guitar and hear live music in a more "natural" way.

"I think the biggest thing for me, and the change I hadn't really anticipated, was being able to hear the sounds of the sea," says Tony. "I was brought to tears when I was able to hear the surf again – whether it was the gentle lapping of water at the sand or the crashing of a giant wave. I loved the incredible sounds that the sea birds make – the cries, shrieks and whistles – and the barking of seals! The sound of the wind, be it a gentle caress of breeze or the gale of a storm, was music to me. I could now hear

the water chattering under my sailboard as I streaked across the water. I could hear all the other surfers and sailboarders interacting with each other and I was now able to participate. I realized that sound was such a huge part of the ocean experience and until now, this had slipped so far away from me.

I strongly encourage anyone with otosclerosis to pursue the stapedotomy. This procedure has radically changed my life and the lives of those near to me, and I hope that my experience helps others to overcome their fears and uncertainty." 

Lesley Woods Fund

The Lesley Woods Care Fund for Professional Actors

was created for actors who suffer a hearing loss or related disorder. This fund was created in honor of the late Lesley Woods, an actress and benefactor of the House Ear Institute and friend of the House Clinic, who left a portion of her estate to the Institute with the stipulation that some of it be used to benefit professional actors who would not otherwise be able to afford treatment for their hearing loss. Actors who seek more information about treatment covered by this fund should contact the House Clinic at: (213) 483-9930.

Lesley Woods

Stage and screen actress who appeared in dozens of TV shows including "Dallas" (as Amanda Ewing), "Falcon Crest," "L.A. Law," "Frasier," "Charmed" and numerous soap operas. She also acted in feature films like "Don't Be Afraid of the Dark," "Testament" and "Nurse Betty" (as Grandmother Blaine), and is the mother of actor Sam McMurray. Woods died August 2, 2004, of natural causes in Los Angeles at age 90.

