

Can You Hear Me Now?

Annabel Anae's mobile business brings hearing help to her patients' homes

BY JACKIE M. YOUNG PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON K. YOSHINO

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU'VE GOT HEARING LOSS?

"Most of my clients say they first experience tinnitus or ringing in the ears, maybe dizziness or they can't hear the telephone. Usually it's their children who complain they're tired of repeating themselves all the time," explains Annabel Anae, audiologist and owner of Hawaii Mobile Audiology & Hearing Aids. "The main causes of hearing loss are aging, noise exposure and hereditary factors."

The National Institutes of Health says 1 in 8 people in the U.S. aged 12 or older has hearing loss in both ears.

"I'm the only mobile audiologist in the state," says Anae of the company she started in 2015. "The best thing about being mobile is it's real-life – it's not sterile – and it's family-oriented. The family is always present and I can educate everybody together."

Anae has 25 years' experience as an audiologist in Hawai'i, American Samoa and California, where she was born and raised. She recently received her doctorate in audiology from A.T. Still University in Arizona. While getting her bachelor's and master's in communication disorders from Brigham Young University in Utah in the 1980s, Anae met and married her husband, Allen, who's from Lā'ie on O'ahu.

Anae has been an audiologist for the state Department of Health on Maui and Straub Medical Center in Honolulu, and screened newborns for hearing in American Samoa – all of which earned her legislative recognition and an award from the American Speech and Hearing Association. She was also director of audiology for a company in Southern California, then started her own business there.

That's where Anae got the idea to become mobile. "I could hear the secretary give directions to the office on the phone to someone I presumed was older," Anae

recalls. "All they wanted to do was drop something off, but the directions became so complicated that I could imagine how difficult it would be for the patient."

So when her husband, a surgeon at Straub, wanted to come back to Hawai'i in 2013, Anae jumped at the chance to start her own mobile audiology firm. "Being mobile works here because of our feeling of 'ohana. And our traffic is ridiculous."

Anae's older brother put up about \$45,000 in startup costs (which she's already paid back) for her audiology equipment and software, including a laptop, audiometer, noise-canceling headphones and an impedance meter. The Waikiki resident also invested in a website, brochures and print advertising.

As for all the traveling she puts in daily, Anae, 58, says with good humor she loves getting outside of an audiology booth and doesn't mind the miles, "especially since I've got a Toyota Prius hybrid." To consolidate her trips, she divides O'ahu into four districts: Honolulu, Central, Leeward and Windward, and visits patients in one area each day.

"I have to be careful when I go into someone's home because it's their private turf. My assistant will screen calls according to need, and whether a mobile visit is appropriate.

"If the person is younger, they may just need education. For children, I usually advise that they go into an office to decrease distractions. My oldest patient is 106."

About 80 percent of Hawaii Mobile Audiology's clients are 75 or older, according to Anae, with the rest in their 20s to 40s, but the latter, she says, primarily want swim plugs, or customized earplugs "for the devices they use, or maybe their spouse snores."

Anae stresses that her services include more than just dispensing hearing aids. "Audiologists identify, evaluate and treat hearing and hearing disorders. We

don't prescribe medication and don't do surgery, but we provide more than just hearing aids."

Nancy Brown, 82, is a retired state Department of Education counselor and lives in Wai'anae. She heard about Hawaii Mobile Audiology about 10 months ago.

"Annabel checked my hearing, ordered my hearing aids and allowed me to try some of the devices that can go with the hearing aids.

"I like the fact that the audiologist comes to my home. I would not purchase from an agency that requires me to go to Honolulu.

"I have referred others to her. I appreciate Annabel's dedication and professionalism."

Neither of Anae's two daughters is interested in taking over the business, so one day she says she may sell it.

"We have been growing steadily and ideally I'd like to add two more audiologists.

"Ten or 15 years ago, mobile was not accepted. These days I think this is a great business model for in-home aging." ■

HEARD ABOUT THIS?

- Digital technology makes today's hearing aids sleek and compact. Styles include in-the-ear, invisible-in-the-canal, completely-in-the-canal and behind-the-ear.
- Besides style, patients should also consider related technology, Anae says. "The iPhone is the only smartphone at this time that can connect directly to a hearing aid. Androids require an ancillary product."
- Hearing loss is measured by degrees, not percentages. It may be mild, moderate, moderately severe, severe or profound, and it can vary across pitches.



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