



Sound Bites Podcast Transcript

Episode: SoundGear w/Stu Bedics and Michael Scholl

Dave Fabry: Welcome to Starkey Sound Bites. I'm your host, Dave Fabry, Starkey's Chief Hearing Health Officer. Now, Protect Your Hearing Month is every October, and in this episode, we're going to focus a little bit on getting a jump start on that very important topic, specifically for professionals working in law enforcement.

Now, before we dive in, a quick note, for those of you who've listened to this podcast in the past, we greatly appreciate your patronage. And if you have ideas for content that we should cover in the future, please send us an email at soundbites@starkey.com and we'll address your suggestions and bring in other experts like we have here today to address those topics in the future.

But I do want to... I'm deeply privileged to have Stu Bedics with us today and Michael Scholl. Now Stu, you have a 40-year career in law enforcement. And most importantly and lately, you were chief of the Arizona State University Police Force, correct?

Stu Bedics: Correct. And thank you for having me here. I'm quite honored to be here.

Dave Fabry: Well, it's a pleasure, and I know we're going to do a deep dive, a little bit on your personal experience, and then as well talk a little bit about how it is that we can focus on preserving the hearing of those who are protecting the public.

And Michael Scholl, Stu's had a 40-year career, I say you haven't worked really at anything because you love what you're doing, but you do really and are distinguished by two titles at Starkey. Not only are you the Chief Business Development Officer, but you're also the Executive Vice President of Corporate Relations. So Michael, thanks for coming back to Starkey.

Michael Scholl: It's great to be back here. And this is such an important topic.

Dave Fabry: It really is. Yeah, I think many people have said it's strange for a hearing aid company to be focused on trying to protect hearing when really we'd be looking at trying to generate more business. But as I've said, not kiddingly at all, there's plenty of business for us to go around. There's the stigma that is associated with hearing loss and use of hearing aids and SoundGear is our effort to really address rather than fixing things after they're broken, let's try to address things up front and protect those people who are in noise.

Michael Scholl: Well, and as you know, Dr. Fabry, we're always talking about the comorbidities related to hearing loss, right? So exactly to your point, let's protect individuals hearing and let's prevent those on the front end. So individuals have the ability to live a long, fruitful life.



Dave Fabry: Yeah. We know that while hearing loss can strike at any age, the most likely factors after birth and genetic conditions that can cause hearing loss at a young age, birthdays and noise exposure will contribute to hearing loss and they're inextricably intertwined.

So Stu, let's talk a little bit about your personal experience. We know that you have a son-in-Law that is well familiar to us-

Stu Bedics: Correct.

Dave Fabry: ... Blaise Delfino. Can you give us any dirt on him that we can use? But we know that hearing has been something that you have awareness for more recently, and then while he and his wife are working to deliver a grandbaby to you, which we're excited about.

Stu Bedics: Yes, we're very excited about that.

Dave Fabry: And we also know that hearing has been an issue that has been on your mind, not only from your 40 years in law enforcement, but also personally. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Stu Bedics: Well, knowing Blaise, and it's funny because my career in law enforcement goes back to 1984 graduated from the police academy, and boy, it seems so long ago. But over those years, just being involved with the four police departments I worked with over that span, either as a chief or assistant chief and the whole time never really focusing on hearing protection because I never knew what was out there until my son-in-law said, "Hey, we'd like to come in and show you some of their products that Starkey offers." So we were open to that.

But I mean, for years it was just wearing the earmuffs or putting inner foamies, and I was under the impression that's all that was out there, as well as my officers. We would go to the range and here you go, set of earmuffs, or they'd give us the foamies. But that was the only place we were protecting our hearing.

And there's a lot of different things that happen in a police officer's life. So usually the range is the part that is what everybody focuses on because of the gunfire. It's very loud and it can be very damaging to your ears. There's been a number of times where I'd be standing on the range and I didn't have my ear protection on and somebody would fire a gun and boy does it wake you up right away.

But there are other things that concern me with, for example, going into a building with an active fire alarm blazing. They are very... I'm sure if somebody accidentally burns their popcorn or something and sets off the fire alarm in this building, it's loud.



Dave Fabry: Absolutely.

Stu Bedics: But when everybody else is getting out, the police officers are coming in and they don't have the ability on the road to have their earmuffs or their foams in their duty bag. So those are some of the things that we considered and thought about when I was at ASU and we found out about the SoundGear product.

Dave Fabry: And one thing I was going to say is police officers, as you mentioned, certainly the range is an area where you're shooting a lot of rounds. You've got people shooting in close proximity, much more so than the average hunter. And so by virtue of that alone, they're at elevated risk for noise-induced loss.

Stu Bedics: Absolutely. They're required twice a year to qualify, and that's a few hundred rounds each time. But one of the things that we focused on at ASU is, so we have the officers that do it twice a year, but then you have your firearms trainers that do it every day. So I had a 12-man firearms training unit at ASU, and we decided to protect their hearing. Those are the people that we started with.

We went after those 12 officers and we're like, "We want to get a product for you." And then coincidentally, we had eight new recruits who were going into the Police Academy. And I said to my command staff at the time, I'm like, "Why don't we start protecting their hearing right from the get-go." So these are eight brand-new officers that are going to the Police Academy, in their early twenties. Let's start protecting their hearing now instead of trying to do something 5, 10, 15 years later, when maybe it could be too late.

Dave Fabry: Yeah. Well, you talked about that you entered the police force in 1984.

Stu Bedics: Yes.

Dave Fabry: And at that time, although OSHA laws were in existence, non-compliance was probably a greater issue with people knowing that they had foams. But what's the challenge for that when someone is not at the target range, but out on active duty? Do many officers, going back to your experience as a young police officer and then continuing to then where you're supervising large forces, what's the problem with foams? Are people wearing them?

Stu Bedics: No, no. What they're doing is if they come into an environment, they just go in and risk it. They're not wearing any hearing protection. And they also, I think officers don't like to put in hearing protection. They want to be aware of their surroundings. They want to be able to hear what's behind them, what's happening, using their senses while doing their job.



Dave Fabry: Yeah. Well, Michael, you use a phrase and expression that you've learned from interacting with veterans and active duty military, you mind sharing that with us.

Michael Scholl: Yeah. No, having many conversations with both VA and military audiologists, and I ask when you see somebody, you ask them are they wear hearing protection? Have they been wearing hearing protection? And the phrase that I've heard more than once from military audiologists is no, because the individual would rather be deaf than dead. And it's to Chief Bedics' point is with foamies or other solid protection, you don't have the situational awareness. And if you are a first responder, if you are in the military, you not only need the protection, but you better believe you need to know what's happening around you and with your colleagues and the other officers who are supporting you and that you are supporting.

So just using a solid plug that suppresses and doesn't amplify, as the chief said, folks don't have any interest in that.

Stu Bedics: Let me share a quick story with you.

Dave Fabry: Please.

Stu Bedics: So when I got to ASU, we had already had an officer who was hired prior to me getting there, and I think he was a 12-year veteran. And he came in one day with a letter from his doctor, and the doctor more or less said, that his hearing was damaged so bad that he no longer could perform the duties of a police officer." And it was because of his safety the Doctor more or less said, His hearing is so bad he can't hear people coming up behind him.

And we had found out, because I questioned him like, "Well, how did we even hire this guy?" Because every police officer who gets hired, no matter what agency I've worked for, they have to have a baseline hearing test chart, and the doctor signs off on it and he says, "That they have the ability to perform the duties of a police officer." This one individual, his hearing was bad because he was in the military. He was at the range, and I don't know what his duty or his assignment was when he was in the military.

Dave Fabry: Artillery.

Stu Bedics: But we, for whatever reason, the chief at the time signed off on it and we hired this guy and then he became one of our range instructors again using foamies and earmuffs. And a lot of times those are the guys that they don't like to wear them and stuff like that. And lo and behold, 12 years into his career, his career was over, it was a shame.



Dave Fabry:

Yeah, I hate to hear that because I think you raised another really important point is that individuals prior to joining the force may have had military experience where they didn't wear protection, and they also might enjoy other noisy hobbies, whether it's woodworking or whether they like to recreationally hunt or if they mow the grass, the ear has a remarkably resilient to noise exposure.

You may have noticed this, let's say early in the career before you were enlightened about use of hearing protection where you come away from a particular event on the range, let's say, where ears are ringing or they feel plugged or stuffy. And it's amazing when you're 24 that hearing recovers over a 24-hour period or so. But if you work and then play with noisy toys, that can really compound. And then the lifetime of exposure to noise, whether it's previous career or previous job settings, can all lead to a situation. And that's a tragic story where now someone who loves doing what he was doing was no longer able to protect himself or others to be able to locate not only whether his sound was present, but where it was.

So Michael, let's talk a little bit about SoundGear. The chief has mentioned that Blaise and you had spoken about SoundGear. For those who haven't heard of SoundGear previously, can you talk a little bit about why it is that we developed this technology?

Michael Scholl:

Yes, absolutely, Dave. So SoundGear is a product that we've had for some time, and we have differing variations of the SoundGear product, right? We have active products, we have static products, but the two products that you hear us talk most about is our SoundGear Phantom product and our SoundGear Instant Fit product. And both of these technologies are active hearing protection.

As you have them in your hand, Dave, the black are the custom Phantom products, and then the orange are the non-custom Instant Fit product. And these products both suppress the loud harmful noises while amplifying your situational awareness, so your surroundings, so you have the ability to have protection, but yet hear what your fellow first responder colleagues are saying.

This is something that over the last few years, we've really made it a priority at Starkey to grow the SoundGear brand. As you mentioned earlier, yes, first and foremost, we are a hearing aid manufacturer helping people with our best in the market technology. But at the same time, how can we, with our current technology and continuously creating new SoundGear technology, how can we prevent hearing loss on the front end?

This is something that I've been especially proud to be a part [00:13:30] of over the last couple of years as we grow this brand, not only for first responders, not only for our military, but think about loud industrial. Think about other



recreational areas where you're constantly exposed to loud noises. Well, products exist, number one that work.

The one thing that we haven't mentioned, the research shows that foamies 70/80% of the time, you don't even get them in correct, right?

Dave Fabry: They're sticking halfway out of the ear.

Michael Scholl: They're halfway out.

Dave Fabry: If I can see most of them, no.

Michael Scholl: So using it as one thing, but are you properly using it? So here is technology that delivers the protection, delivers the amplification, and certainly the custom product. Guess what, there's only one way to put it in because it's custom to your ear, the Phantom product. So we're really proud of prioritizing this. We had a great experience with Chief Bedics in Arizona State, and over the last couple of years we've been growing our SoundGear market federally with the Department of Defense. They're in the process of procuring the non-custom Instant Fit products.

Our military men and women and folks within the VA have the ability to purchase our Phantom products. We're seeing that growth in that area, and we're prioritizing local and state law enforcement across the country. Because they are on the front line, they are constantly around loud noises. So conversations that we're having, not only with individual police departments, but with state legislators, guess what, they want to help protect individuals hearing in their state. So SoundGear is something that from the top down, we've made a priority and there's a lot of potential to continue to grow that brand over the next years.

Dave Fabry: So Chief, let's talk about at ASU then. How did the process go? You had to get approval, for support to try to come up with protection. And was that a difficult process? Did you meet a lot of resistance?

Stu Bedics: No, to the contrary. So Michael and his team came in and just like any other salesperson, we had a meeting or command staff sat around the table, they showed us their products, and we did a couple tests. We had a couple officers get the SoundGears. And then as I mentioned previously, we bought them for those eight new recruits and we didn't buy them until we got positive feedback. So the first group, I think there were seven of us who got the SoundGear Phantoms.

Dave Fabry: The Phantoms, the custom ones.



Stu Bedics: We got them, went to the range, couldn't believe they were extraordinary how well they worked. And what's really nice is in Arizona, as you know, it's quite hot. So a lot of our officers wear what's called Bonnie hat or a Boonie hat or whatever. So it's a hat with the... because you want to stay out of the sun. Well, those are not conducive to the earmuffs and know putting the foamies and stuff really just didn't cut it.

So we buy the SoundGear Phantoms for the first seven. And the results were, I should say, the reviews and evaluations were really good. So we're like, "Okay, let's take it to the next step." And then we did our firearms training unit and those eight recruits, so that was another 20 units that we purchased. And then I made those officers, I actually sent an evaluation form out to them and I said, "How do you like the product? What do you don't like about it?" And the reviews were glowing. Every single 12 reviews that I got back were all extremely positive. And then the last question was, "Do you think we should buy this for the rest of the department?" And it was 12 yeses.

Dave Fabry: Wow.

Stu Bedics: So it was the end of the year. We had some money that was either left in one of our accounts that we had from asset forfeiture, and those funds are always earmarked towards training and products or equipment. And so we decided to buy them for the rest of the department, and everybody loves it.

Dave Fabry: That's terrific. And did they have the opportunity, they said, yes, we should recommend this for the entire force, did they give specific reasons? I can think of a couple, but I was wondering if any of those reasons came out in their suggestions.

Stu Bedics: Well, a lot of the things I already highlighted, the ease of use, the custom, the ability to have them in. When I wore mine, I have a set, I put them in when I got to the range, and I didn't take off until, or taking them out, until I got in my car to drive home, because you could leave him in. You're able to hear the range instructor telling you how many shots to fire, how many... You could hear when people were firing alongside, you could hear when people are behind you.

It's so funny, one of my older officers, and it's funny because me and him have a little, we had a debate of who was serving the longest, and he has me by a year or two when he had his... So now here's an officer who was wearing hearing aids. So he would have, you can see the hearing aid behind his ear. And we gave him, he was one of our firearms instructors, and I gave him his SoundGears, and he stopped me in the hall one day. He goes, "Chief, these things are great." He goes, "I can't hear anything with them." And I said, "Did you turn them on Ron?" He goes, "Huh." Yeah.

Dave Fabry: He didn't even realize.



Stu Bedics: He was only experiencing the-

Dave Fabry: The passive protection, yeah.

Stu Bedics: When we turned it on. It was like the first time he was able to hear, he was like, "Wow. He goes, now I could be at the range and I actually can hear people." He had to take his hearing aids off probably when he was at the range, especially if he was putting foamies in or if he was using the earmuffs. So that's just one example of an older officer who was embracing technology and boy did it... The look on his face was like, this is amazing.

Dave Fabry: I love that. And the question I have then a follow-up of that is, you talk about most of them using them on the range. Do you have any... You talked about that other use case where you're walking in as a first responder into a situation where there are sirens and alarms and other things going off that are pretty loud and difficult to understand, but they could still hear to communicate with each other. Do any of them use them-

Stu Bedics: Yes,.

Dave Fabry: ... in an active duty kind of situation?

Stu Bedics: So we encourage them when we bought them... They all have them, they're all small case, they could keep them on their pockets somewhere. A lot of them wear outer duty vest that they could put these in. We have a brand new 6,000 seat arena on campus where the Coyotes used to play, but then we also had concerts and the officers, because it was so loud inside there, it's a closed environment. So they were wearing them at the concerts.

If they're walking into a building with the fire alarm going off. Home football games, we have 65,000 people in a stadium and there's pyrotechnics going off and stuff like that. And what's the beauty of it is if you're just putting in that passive hearing protection at a concert or something like that, now you can't hear your radio. But with the Phantoms, you're able to hear the radio because it picks up those other noises.

Michael Scholl: That's the great thing about the Phantoms, and we talk with law enforcement folks across the country about this. There really isn't a situation when you can't have them in because they're a custom. Because you get the protection and you get the situational awareness whether you're driving in your squad car, whether you're out at an event.

We see a lot of utilization of these at large sporting events where perhaps the university has their own police or they'll contract with the local sheriff or state highway patrol who then use these because it does get loud as we can all attest to in these events. So the great thing, because it's custom, because you get the



amplification, it's Bluetooth, it's rechargeable. There really isn't a situation while you're on active duty that you can't utilize this product.

Dave Fabry: Right. And going to that I think my dad worked at a paper mill in Wisconsin where he was in continuous noise throughout the day, so he needed the best passive attenuation that he could receive. You've highlighted several cases that I didn't even think about before where you're going in from quiet, into noise, then back out again, and always wanting to be able to hear and locate where sounds are. That, I think, really make a compelling argument that this should be table stakes for every police force and first responder.

Stu Bedics: Well, it's funny because, and that was part of my selling point when we as a command staff, because that wasn't just my decision. We sat around a table on our command staff together, collectively, decided that we were going to move forward to make this purchase. We buy equipment for our officers, we buy them bulletproof vests. They're not cheap, they're over \$1,000. And hopefully the officer never ever uses that during his career. It's a piece of equipment that we hope they never use.

Well, we made this purchase, we knew they were going to use them. We knew they were going to use them at the range. They were going to use them in the arenas inside the buildings during fire alarms. And we're taking that proactive step to prevent and protect their hearing. So they could work 20 years, 25 years.

Dave Fabry: Well, they could work their full careers.

Michael Scholl: And the other piece, chief, if you don't mind commenting on, I think Arizona State did a great job. I mean, obviously Arizona State, the university in general is known to be on the forefront of embracing new technology and developing new technology, as a university. But when you had success and you fit your officers, you reached out to the local media and actually got some earned media from some of the Phoenix stations from the perspective of, look, we're doing what's right for our officers. Their health and wellness because of the comorbidities related to hearing loss, we understand how important this is, and we are taking an initiative unlike few universities have. So talk a little bit about what you did with your local [inaudible]

Stu Bedics: Well this issue loves to be, they claim to be number one in innovation. President Crow over the years, I think it was like seven, eight years in a row, number one in innovation. So that was one of our talking points. We want to be innovative because we knew there was nobody else in the valley, the Metropolitan Valley in Phoenix, that had this type of hearing protection. And lo and behold, we found out that we're one of the first departments in the nation to actually do something like this.



So we contacted the local media stations, we're like, "Hey, how about a feel-good story." Because too often you turn on the news and it's something negative. We're like, "How about a feel-good story. Here's something we're doing for our officers. We're being proactive and we're purchasing them equipment to help protect their ears." And they all jumped on it. It was on the five o'clock news. Our own media department did a story on it, and it's on our website. So very positive.

Dave Fabry: That's fantastic. And I just can't thank you enough for raising awareness. I spend my professional career as an audiologist trying to raise awareness for the importance of hearing as a vital human sense. In your case, it relates directly to safety and to be able to extend an officer's career by protecting the hearing and really raising that awareness early on with those new recruits. But also, it sounds like you even made converts out of some of those more senior officers who now recognize, okay, the benefit of extending their careers at a point in time where they're getting more days behind them than in front of them.

Stu Bedics: I had a senior firearms instructor came up to me and shook my hand. He goes, "Chief, best piece of equipment you ever bought for us."

Dave Fabry: Wow. Well, and although the majority of our audience is professionals, dispensers, hearing instrument specialists and audiologists, there are also maybe consumers out there who listen from time to time. And I think for this episode, so if you are engaged in noisy activities and particularly intermittent activities like that where foam ear protection isn't convenient or you don't use it, and if your ears ring or are plugged or you're noticing difficulty with your hearing, seek out the help of a hearing care professional who can talk to you about the different options.

Go to starkey.com or the SoundGear website, which I'll throw to Michael in a minute, but to help see what options exist for you. But importantly, as the chief said, with these Phantoms which are custom, it's really critical that you see someone who's comfortable making impressions in your ears and getting a good fit. So that, as you said, "You'd wear them all the full day or however long you're at the range-"

Stu Bedics: They're comfortable.

Dave Fabry: "... and forget to take them out until you get into the car," that's great. But that's crucial, that a good impression, that's a good seal, provides that comfort and fit and all day comfort.

Michael Scholl: And for those of you who are on or listening the podcast that are hearing professionals, many of you have local universities in your backyard. Colleges, police departments, reach out to somebody at the local university or at the police department within the university and talk to them about hearing



protection. Reach out to, you could reach out to me or others on the SoundGear team, and we can provide information to help you go in and make the case to your local department about the importance of hearing protection.

Because clearly, as we heard from Chief Bedics and the use case at Arizona State, this is a product that officers want to wear and it is making a difference. So think about ways in which you can spread the message about SoundGear in your local community to law enforcement, first responders and others.

Dave Fabry: Website for SoundGear?

Michael Scholl: SoundGear.com.

Dave Fabry: Okay. And for professionals or end users alike?

Michael Scholl: Absolutely.

Dave Fabry: Well, Chief Bedics, I can't thank you enough for your service.

Stu Bedics: Thank you.

Dave Fabry: And also for being with us here today to spread the word about your efforts, which really are remarkable in the way that you did this at the grassroots level.

Stu Bedics: I don't want people to be like I was. We more or less had our head in the ground and we didn't know this type of technology was out there. And anything that I can do or my team was able to do to spread the awareness and because it needs to be known that it's out there.

Dave Fabry: Yeah. And now you have moved from ASU, correct?

Stu Bedics: Well, I actually retired.

Dave Fabry: Retired. So now you are in South Carolina, you're going to be chasing down your grandchild.

Stu Bedics: Yes.

Dave Fabry: Love that. And congratulations on retirement-

Stu Bedics: Thank you.

Dave Fabry: ... that is a well-deserved honor. And I can tell you as a grandparent myself, nothing better. So look forward to that next-

Stu Bedics: Looking forward to it.



Dave Fabry: ... stage of your career. To be able to now, with the protection that you provided, to hear that grandbaby when-

Stu Bedics: Yes.

Dave Fabry: ... they're born. Michael, thank you as always-

Michael Scholl: Thank you.

Dave Fabry: ... for being here and for offering this up, to see people at www.SoundGear.com

As well. I'll reiterate what I said at the opening. If you have ideas for future topics, this was protect your hearing month and SoundGear is the appropriate topic. But if you have other topics, send us an email at soundbites@starkey.com. Thank you for listening.

If you enjoyed this episode, please share it with your colleagues or friends, like and subscribe so that we can continue to offer great content for you in the future. And until then, I thank both of you for being with us-

Stu Bedics: Thank you.

Dave Fabry: ... today, and we look forward to seeing and hearing from you again very soon.