



# Sounding the call for support

## Musician forms tinnitus group

By Kevin Beese  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Joel Styzens gets a break from the constant A-sharp hum in his head only while in the shower. For four years, the music composer has suffered from tinnitus, a maddening ringing in the ears, and hyperacusis, an oversensitivity to certain sounds.

"I am one of the cleanest people you'll ever meet," the 28-year-old Styzens quipped of his need to shower at least twice a day for a few minutes of relief.

Styzens has come to terms with the condition he attributes to a lifetime in music, most notably playing drums in the jazz and rock scenes. But he knows that tinnitus is no laughing matter, and like many others with the disorder, he also suffered from severe depression.

Forced to give up playing the drums and facing the possibility of losing his music career, Styzens looked for a local support network that might help.

"I spent a lot of time online, looking at different message boards. I started therapy and spent more time online and got more and more depressed (hearing about all the negatives with tinnitus)," Styzens said.

He saw that the American Tinnitus Association had support groups in other parts of the country, but not one in Illinois. So he formed one: The Greater Chicago Tinnitus Support Group.

"There is a wealth of information online ... but there is negativity too. I wanted to start a group that was a more positive and productive environment," said Styzens, who gave up drums but dusted off an acoustic guitar and



Musician, composer and teacher Joel Styzens, 28, developed tinnitus and hyperacusis four years ago. He has formed a tinnitus support group to help others with ringing in the ears. CHRIS SWEDA/TRIBUNE PHOTO

was able to continue his career.

The support group will have its second meeting this month at the Old Town School of Folk Music's Armitage Avenue location, where Styzens also teaches. Although a go-getter who has formed his own record label, A-Sharp, and produced an acoustic guitar album raising awareness of tinnitus and other hearing issues, Styzens took four months to get the support group started. He said he was afraid to do it on his own because of the seriousness of the condition.

Dr. Jill Meltzer, Styzens' audiologist, is scheduled to speak at the meeting. "A group like this can be very helpful as a means of in-

*"It definitely limits your life."*

— Johnny Bash, who has tinnitus

formation, general and specific and pertinent to others in the group," said Meltzer. "What you don't want it to turn into is telling stories and one being more miserable than the next."

More than 50 million Americans experience some tinnitus, the American Tinnitus Association estimates. In about 12 million of those, the condition is severe enough to call for medical attention, and about 2 million sufferers find it so debilitating they cannot function on a day-to-day basis.

There is no cure for tinnitus, but some of the treatment includes drug therapy, as well as sound and cognitive therapy.

There is also biofeedback relaxation and TMJ treatment for those whose tinnitus stems from that condition.

One treatment Meltzer uses to help reduce the disturbance for tinnitus sufferers is neuromonics, a music therapy using a pattern of acoustic stimuli designed to retrain the neural pathway. In a 2007 article in *Tinnitus Today*, the ATA's magazine, Meltzer wrote that the therapy can help patients manage symptoms such as anxiety, sleep disturbances and trouble concentrating.

Like Styzens, support group member Johnny Bash has had tinnitus for four years.

"Audiologists and (ear, nose and throat doctors) expect an epidemic of young people with hearing

problems and tinnitus," said Bash, 62. "We as a society have gotten so loud. Movies are loud; we want to feel the action."

"It changes your sleep," Bash said. "It keeps you awake, so much that you get depressed. It has a snowballing effect. It definitely limits your life."

*The Greater Chicago Tinnitus Support Group will meet from 10 to 11:30 a.m. Jan. 29 at the Old Town School of Folk Music, 909 W. Armitage Ave. Go to relax-your-ears.com.*

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