

# **St. Leo parishioner leads American Speech-Language-Hearing Association**

When Dr. Paul Rao taught for a year at St. Thomas the Apostle School in Washington four decades ago, he struggled to understand one of his students. The girl was born with a cleft palate, and had difficulty forming her words.

By the end of the year, however, Rao was astounded to find the girl speaking much more fluently – so much so that he understood her clearly. The student had been working with a speech pathologist, undergoing weekly therapy at a clinic operated by The Catholic University of America in Washington.

Rao was so impressed by the student's dramatic turnaround that he visited the clinic and spoke with the chair of the speech pathology department.

"I left there saying, 'This is what I want to do,'" remembered Rao, who went on to earn a master's degree in speech pathology from Catholic University and a doctorate in hearing and speech science from the University of Maryland, College Park.

"Human communication is essential to life," said Rao, a parishioner of St. Leo in Little Italy. "When someone has a loss of communication abilities, they are more challenged in life."

Rao now serves as president of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association and vice president of operations at the National Rehabilitation Hospital in Washington, D.C.

As president of the 145,000-member ASLHA, Rao has raised awareness about communications issues. He emphasizes professionalism and ethics, while also encouraging more people to explore careers in the growing field.

"The longer you live, the increasing likelihood there is that you are going to succumb to a stroke or some sort of illness," he explained. "The fastest-growing

segment of the population is those over 85. They are going to need swallowing and speech and language intervention.”

There have been major advances in technologies in the past few years that improve treatments for speech-related disorders, he said.

“We are at the cutting-edge of swallowing disorders,” Rao explained. “We’re inserting tubes to see if a person is able to swallow and to see how the throat is working. The technology has been phenomenal.”

Specializing in the loss of language as a result of strokes, Rao said research is ongoing into the use of electronic stimulation in the brain to determine whether it benefits the recovery of language. Patients are also using cell phone icons to help in communication, he said.

Rao, who treated South Dakota Sen. Tim Johnson after he suffered a stroke, took an unusual path to his field. The Pittsburgh native spent six years in minor seminary at St. Charles Seminary in Catonsville and two years at St. Vincent College Seminary in Latrobe, Pa., where he earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy. His religious training had a practical and spiritual benefit in shaping his approach to speech pathology.

“I had eight years of Latin and four years of Greek,” said Rao, who was particularly inspired by a priest who taught elocution and speech courses. “I learned a tremendous amount about language and the discipline of language and the etymology of language.”

Rao, who met his wife of 40 years, Martina, while studying at Catholic University, compared the “servant-leader” model of the priesthood to his work in speech pathology. A lector and extraordinary minister of holy Communion who proudly “slings meatballs” at parish festivals, he believes he is ministering to people through his work in speech-language pathology.

“Working in this field has been a great blessing,” he said.