



The ceramics program explores opportunities for creativity and self-expression for the blind community

## Seeing With Your Hands

### The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind Ceramics Project

A special place where passion meets compassion, reads the cover of a brochure for the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Open that brochure and discover several rewarding expressions from both the blind and their instructors guiding the searching hands over the clay, yarn and fabric materials.

“Heretofore, the blind and visually impaired had limited options for leisure and recreational activities. Through the Arts and Crafts program, particularly our ceramics program, clients involve themselves in activities that promote opportunities to explore a variety of textures and create objects that allow for self-expression and creativity, while encouraging fine motor skills that provide transference to much needed Braille skills,” says Virginia A. Jacko, president and CEO of the Miami Lighthouse.

Virginia, who herself is visually impaired, was kind enough to take time out of her busy day for an interview about her life’s project.

**SA:** When and why was the center created?

**VJ:** The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind was founded under the inspiration of two blind pioneers, Dolly Gamble and Helen Keller in 1931. The Miami Lighthouse has a rich tradition in program innovation. For example, in the early 1950s the chairman of the board, Dr. Bascom Palmer asked the Miami Lighthouse directors for a place to see the indigents of Miami and to conduct eye

By *Melissa Mayhew*



Images courtesy Miami Lighthouse for the Blind



research. The board then provided \$700,000 (approximately \$20 million today) as well as the right to the land to start the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute and later the Anne Bates Leach Hospital.

**SA:** You are credited for pioneering the Ceramics Program. What spawned the idea?

**VJ:** When the neighbouring Lions Home for the Blind closed, about 40 participants became clients of the Miami Lighthouse but many had already completed our traditional vision rehabilitation programs. It seemed fitting to hire Nelba Gonzalez, a local artist with previous experience instructing the visually impaired.

**SA:** What other programs does the center offer?

**VJ:** The Miami Lighthouse offers a continuum of services including Blind Babies, Teen Programs and Adult Services. These programs include, but are not limited to, the following services: Braille instructions, adaptive technology for the blind, activities for daily living (e.g. cooking), orientation and mobility (e.g. promoting cane travel), low vision examinations, a mobile optometric unit providing free eye exams and glasses for children, children's summer camps, music instruction/production, fitness programs, diabetes awareness, and our Solutions Store is open to the community and provides specialized tools for the visually impaired.

**SA:** Are the beneficiaries of the programs involved in other community activities?

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**VJ:** Our teens and young adults frequently participate in community performances such as The Children's Trust Lifetime Achievement Luncheon, Church by the Sea Annual Women's Luncheon, Miami Art Museum functions and much more. Some of our most treasured ceramic pieces have been shared with community leaders.

**SA:** Virginia, who are your most cherished sponsors?

**VJ:** The Miami Lighthouse Social Group Activities Ceramics Program is partially funded by grants from the Children's Trust, ACT/CCDH (All Children Together), the Braman Family Foundation, the Rotary Club of Miami, the Lions for the Blind, the Alliance for Human Services, and the Ceramics League of Miami has assisted with firing the ceramic pieces in their kiln. The Florida Division of Blind Services also provides partial funding for participants enrolled in one of our vision rehabilitation programs.

**SA:** At the end of the day, how does it feel to play such a giving role in the lives of others?

**VJ:** It is heart-warming when a blind client says, "Please take good care of my piece," when referring to a finished work of art being given to a community leader. Others often say, "The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind is like my second home." One client produced a ceramic mermaid and upon completion exclaimed, "Now I know what a mermaid looks like!" **SA**

[www.miamilighthouse.org](http://www.miamilighthouse.org)