

MIAMI LIGHTHOUSE FOR THE BLIND

With words, music, Feliciano inspires

The Grammy winner spoke with students and received an award Thursday in Little Havana for his work with aspiring musicians.

BY JORDAN LEVIN

The 20 or so aspiring musicians sitting a few feet away from one of the legends of pop music couldn't see him very well.

Some of them couldn't see him at all.

But they could hear José Feliciano, who became an eight-time Grammy-winning pop artist despite being born blind and growing up poor.

"We don't play differently from people who can see," said Feliciano, best known for hit covers of The Doors' *Light My Fire* and the holiday classic *Feliz Navidad*. "We just play better."

That kind of confidence is exactly what directors of the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired hoped Feliciano would foster in their students when the 65-year-old guitarist and singer visited them Thursday at the Little Havana center's music program.

A recent addition to the 80-year-old Lighthouse's many programs and services for people with vision problems, the Better Chance music production program teaches students how to play instruments, compose, and use recording and music production software.

The idea of the program is to build job skills and a sense of self-worth.

One of its graduates, Natalia Sulca, received a scholarship this year to attend the Berklee College of Music in Boston. And others have found work as music engineers, performers and producers.

Being blind may make many things difficult, but it can create new pathways into music. Shortly before Feliciano arrived, Howard Huggins, 26, sat in front of a computer listening intently as teacher Antonio Cobo explained the basics of MIDI software.

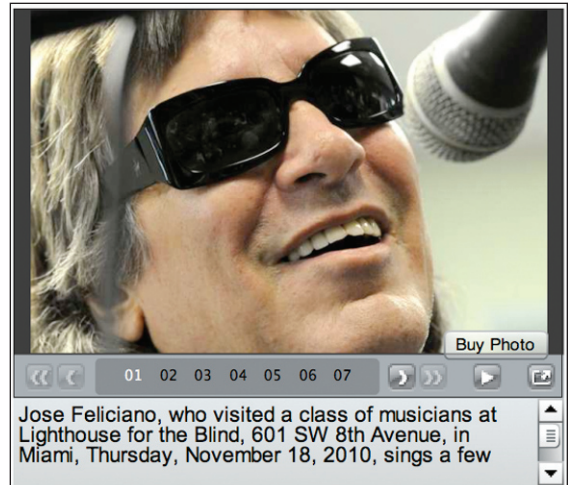
"I'm teaching you not just how to make a beat," Cobo said. "I'm teaching you how to make a whole song from scratch."

Music opened up for Huggins after a car accident five years ago left him blind.

"From losing a lot of my sight, my other senses they intensified," Huggins said.

Learning music has given him "a new sense of self-worth for my new condition," he said.

Sitting in front of an admiring crowd of music students, teachers, staff members and guests, a spry Feliciano described how playing music gave him a sense of accomplishment.



When he was growing up in New York's Spanish Harlem, his family was so poor that, he said, he used to tie together broken strings on his guitar with thread.

"When I started learning music I found out I could do something nobody else could do," said Feliciano, who was scheduled to receive the Lighthouse's Recognition Award Thursday evening. "As a kid it made me feel better about being blind."

He has already recorded promotional announcements and donated one of his guitars to the music program.

He is not the Miami Lighthouse's only celebrated supporter. The studio where Feliciano spoke and the music students work is named for legendary Miami producer Henry Stone, head of R&B and disco label TK Records, and his wife Inez.

Stone, who was on hand Thursday, is also blind, and began teaching music production at the Lighthouse while attending programs there.

Stone and Feliciano joked about famous singers and songwriters they have known.

"When I started to sing I was imitating Frankie Lymon," said Feliciano. "He was as talented as Michael Jackson was in his day," Stone said.

Feliciano teased Omar Banegas, who wanted to take a break from his music studies to visit his native Honduras.

"You want to get a girlfriend, huh?" Feliciano said. "Well, don't get a blind wife, 'cause she won't be able to drive you around."

Edgardo Santiago, who, like Feliciano, was from Puerto Rico, said he was inspired to play music after hearing his father play a Feliciano song on the guitar.

"I asked him, 'What song is that? It's so pretty,'" said Santiago. "Ever since then, I always wanted to meet you."

Feliciano urged the students to practice music and self-sufficiency.

"You must learn how to be independent," he said.

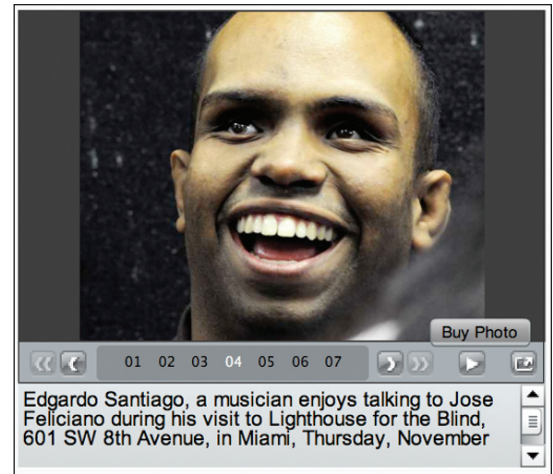
"You must not allow anyone to show you pity if you are blind. It doesn't mean you shouldn't accept help if you need it, but try and do as much as you can on your own."

Robert Thomas Jr., a drummer and percussionist teaching at the Lighthouse who has played with famed jazz acts Weather Report and Stan Getz, said his students were exceptionally driven.

"Their ability to focus sets them apart from sighted musicians," said Thomas. "Also, they want it. They want it bad. And if you want something bad you put your heart and soul into it, regardless of whether you can see or not."

For aspiring songwriter and producer Furious Berrain, 19, hearing Feliciano made him feel he can climb to similar heights.

"José Feliciano is one who has made it, and seeing people like him and other precedents who set the tone for visually impaired people and also make some of the best musicians, I feel like I definitely can do it. There's no excuse."



Edgardo Santiago, a musician enjoys talking to Jose Feliciano during his visit to Lighthouse for the Blind, 601 SW 8th Avenue, in Miami, Thursday, November



Kieran, who belongs to Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Lighthouse for the Blind, also blind, listens to Jose Feliciano, who visited a class at the Lighthouse,



Omar Banegas, left, of Honduras, tapped his hands along with Jose Feliciano as he played the conga drums while visiting the musicians at Lighthouse for



Malcolm Barley, left, 20, a musician, at Lighthouse for the Blind, 601 SW 8th Avenue, in Miami, thanked Jose Feliciano for donating an acoustic guitar which he was