

Miami Lighthouse celebrates 85th anniversary with exhibit by blind artists

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Artist Victor Brown on Sept. 8, 2015, at a Miami Lighthouse for the Blind art display created by visually impaired people.

Charles Trainor Jr., Miami Herald Staff

Victor Brown stood before a crowd attending Miami Lighthouse's 85th anniversary at the Miami Center for Architecture and Design (MCAD) building. He couldn't see the audience, but they could see him. Brown grew up with a detached retina, at first leaving him visually impaired and later blind. He's been attending Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired in Little Havana for more than eight years.

Brown's woven American flag, made with macrame yarn and stretching at about five feet, lay on display at MCAD along with other arts pieces by other blind Miami Lighthouse clients. The exhibit runs through Oct. 17.

Miami Lighthouse taught him to see colors through touch, not sight, Brown said. "You have to fit in. You can't wear purple and orange everyday," Brown said, jokingly.

Today, Miami Lighthouse has close to 13,000 clients. The nonprofit offers programs for all ages, including a work internship program, Braille lessons and a parent information program for the family members of blind children.

"A blind person can be independent and be productive and live on their own," said Virginia A. Jacko President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse. "They just do it differently."

Jacko mentioned a client in the internship program who works at Walgreens and also attends Miami Dade College. "We want them to learn techniques that will help them get a career," Jacko said. "Like Braille. Braille is literacy." Over the summer, 35 teenagers were part of the internship program.



Nelba Gonzalez, Virginia Jacko and Amanda Keeley with Jacko's service dog, Kieran, on Sept. 8, 2015, at a Miami Lighthouse for the Blind art display created by visually impaired people.

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Virginia A. Jacko | *President and CEO of Miami Lighthouse*

Miami Lighthouse first opened in 1931. Attendees made brooms and sold them on the street. “At the time that was what was expected of a blind person,” Jacko said. “Today, attendees have their art on display.” Other art pieces at the exhibit include a papier-mâché flower bouquet plastered against a picture frame, and ceramic figurines of clowns or cars.

Nelba Gonzalez, coordinator for arts and crafts at Miami Lighthouse, said she uses rough materials like beads and yarn to help her students train their sense of touch. “People who read Braille recognize shapes and textures,” Gonzalez said. “Their art establishes a connection for people with sight.” Gonzalez encourages students who are blind to paint familiar images to keep their memories fresh.

“My main goal is to help my students see through their hands,” Gonzalez said. Amanda Keeley, founder of Exile Books, agrees. Her goal is to have people perceive art, specifically architecture, by using different senses — touch being one of them.

The exhibit is part of Exile Books and MCAD’s Listen To This Building art project, which is centered on addressing visual impairments, accessibility, independent publishing and understanding Miami architecture. “Having Miami Lighthouse be part of it was a critical component of partnership to have,” Keeley said.

The exhibit features 3D architectural models created by Florida International University’s College of Architecture and The Arts (CARTA). A Braille artist’s book published by Exile Books commemorates the exhibit. “Scale-wise I can’t physically feel a building. The models help people see the building without sight,” Keeley said. “The entire exhibition and books are made for people who are blind.”

To donate to Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired visit <https://secure.miamilighthouse.org/Donations.asp>

For the Listen To This Building program schedule, visit miamicad.org or exilebooks.com



Miami Lighthouse for the Blind displays art created by visually impaired people, Sept. 8, 2015.

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