

Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program receives honors

By MARILYN BOWDEN

The Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program, a division of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, in 2011 received the South Florida Business Journal Excellence in Health Care Award in the Community Outreach category.

The award recognizes a dramatic increase in the number of children receiving free eye examinations and eyeglasses through Heiken over the past three years.

For this, the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program was given the Bronze Medal for Organizations in the 2012 Miami Today Gold Medals competition.

Receiving the award was Virginia Jacko, president of both the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program and the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind & Visually Impaired.

"In 2007," Ms. Jacko says, "we merged with the Bruce Heiken Fund, a program started by the Miami-Dade Optometric Physician's Association in honor of an optometrist killed in an accident. The concern was that nothing was being done for children who fail vision tests at school because parents couldn't afford to take the next step."

She says the Heiken Fund needed to find an organization that had an infrastructure in place.



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

Virginia Jacko presides over Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program.

them," Ms. Jacko says. "They were providing about 2,500 children with comprehensive eye exams, and typically, 75% would need glasses. With our infrastructure, we were able to grow it. Nearly 10,000 were given exams last year, and be-

ferred had already failed a screening, 80% required glasses. Optilab provides the glasses at highly subsidized rates.

"These are kids who, if we didn't have this program, would continue to struggle at school," she says.



Photo by Sergio Alsina

Steven Marcus and Heiken's Virginia Jacko with the award presented by Manny Rodriguez, right, FPL regional director for external affairs.

homes without any kind of insurance, the program does not compete with doctors."

Last year, she says, the Heiken Children's Vision Program was able to expand operations with funding from the Florida Department of Health and other community foundations.

The innovative program may become a model for other communities. An article about it co-authored by Ms. Jacko, Alan P. Levitt, Steven E. Marcus and Alfred A. Rosenbloom and published in "Optometry: The Journal of the American Optometric Association" resulted in inquiries, including one from a husband-and-wife team of optometrists who want to replicate the program in the West.

Next on the agenda, Ms. Jacko says, is a marketing study in

Foundation of South Florida to find ways to make the Heiken Children's Vision Program more cost-effective.

Currently, the program funds four mobile units bringing optometrists to schools to give eye examinations. The parents of children who need glasses are given vouchers for in-office visits — but many don't use them.

"We plan to hire a marketing company," she says, "to find out what the barriers are to using the vouchers, and also to see if the children are still wearing the glasses a year later."

From this, she expects another publication. "I don't think nonprofits typically do market research to determine the out-