

WISH BOOK

# He has autism and poor sight, but was learning new skills. Then the pandemic struck

BY AIMEE REYES  
South Florida Media Network

For 29-year-old Christian Castello, who has autism and vision problems, attending the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired has allowed him to be more independent. But the pandemic has kept him from returning, and his mother is concerned about its impact on his well-being.

The Miami Lighthouse offers services to individuals of all ages, including vision examinations, occupational therapy, and adaptive aids and devices.

“The Miami Lighthouse for the Blind was becoming very good for him in the sense that he felt more independent and felt different, but ever since COVID-19, he has not been back,” said his mother, Nora Castello. “His program is not scheduled to be back until January.”

Castello was diagnosed with autism at 4 and retinitis pigmentosa at 10. Retinitis pigmentosa is a genetic disorder where the retina is damaged and affects one in 4,000 people in



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Christian Castello was diagnosed with autism at 4 and retinitis pigmentosa at 10.



the United States. Although most people don't lose their vision completely, many are declared legally blind and are unable to perform tasks such as driving or reading. Growing up, Christian Castello struggled with behavior issues in school and witnessed arguments between his mother and his then-stepfather.

In 2008, Nora Castello said she made the difficult

decision to place her son in a group home.

“I was a new mom, then my mom passed away, and then I had my second son who is also autistic,” she said. “He was not in the same group for all these years, and he moved around a lot, but I make sure I visit him every Saturday morning.”

The Miami Lighthouse offers online classes every Friday, but Christian Castello requires one-on-one help, which he does not receive in his group home, in south Miami-Dade County, because he speaks only

English and is around people who speak only Spanish.

Castello enrolled in the Miami Lighthouse in 2018 and participated in programs such as the independent living adult program and computer classes.

“We have clients under the age of 55 years with health, cognitive and physical issues — besides their visual impairment — who are not able to work,” said Corina Hernandez, senior case manager for the Miami Lighthouse. “The program instructs the clients on how to be independent and learning safety techniques.”

The activities include learning how to do laundry, heat meals in a microwave, and choose the right floor when riding an elevator. The program also offers orientation mobility classes to help clients like Castello use the white cane mostly used by legally blind individuals as a third eye to guide themselves.

“Christian has participated in computer classes and used the screen magnifying and reading programs necessary for them such as Zoom Text, Fusion, and Jaws,” said Hernandez. “We also offer iPhone, Android, and Comcast

classes where they learn how to text or email their loved ones as well as to operate a TV through a talking remote control.”

Hernandez and Michelle Munoz, also from the Miami Lighthouse, nominated Christian Castello for Wish Book.

He is looking for new clothing, a backpack to carry his belongings as well as a specially designed tablet for the visually impaired to listen to music and play games. The total cost is about \$1,000.

“Christian has lost a lot of weight, and his clothes do not fit him anymore,” said Hernandez. “But he has

become such a strong person despite his impairments, and he prefers to live his life with a smile.”

HOW TO HELP

Wish Book is trying to help hundreds of families in need this year. To donate, pay securely at [MiamiHerald.com/wishbook](http://MiamiHerald.com/wishbook). For information, call 305-376-2906 or email [wishbook@miamiherald.com](mailto:wishbook@miamiherald.com). (The most requested items are often laptops and tablets for school, furniture, and accessible vans.) Read more at [MiamiHerald.com/wishbook](http://MiamiHerald.com/wishbook).

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To donate online, visit [miamiherald.com/wishbook](http://miamiherald.com/wishbook)  
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Once all eligible nominees' wishes have been fulfilled, Herald Charities Inc. may use funds for other charitable purposes.



SAM NAVARRO Special for the Miami Herald

The Goodyear Blimp flies over Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach to honor frontline workers and essential personnel on May 22, 2020.

MIAMI BEACH

## Mount Sinai hospital is scheduling seniors to get their COVID-19 vaccines

BY BEN CONARCK  
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Some of the first South Florida seniors in the general public are likely to receive doses of either of the federally authorized COVID-19 vaccines as soon as this weekend at Mount Sinai Medical Center in Miami Beach.

Mount Sinai is still vaccinating its own workers, but CEO Steve Sonenreich said his hospital has enough stock of both the Pfizer BioNTech and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines to move forward with inoculating the city's oldest residents from the novel virus while that process plays out.

The hospital system will start with people over the age of 75 and lower that to people over the age of 65 once it has completed the first round of seniors in the older age bracket. Sonenreich said the vaccinations will not be restricted to Mount Sinai patients.

“We are aggressively reaching out to our patient base and to people who reside in our community, particularly those who are in senior housing facilities, so that we can reach as many people as possible,” Sonenreich told the Miami Herald on Wednesday. “Everyone knows that those are the age groups that faced the most difficult challenges with this pandemic.”

Mount Sinai is partnering with the city of Miami Beach to coordinate the logistics of getting people who don't have their own transportation to the hospital's campus off Alton Road.

That could potentially mean utilizing the city's trolley system, but Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber said the plans are still in flux and that there was another call sorting out the details on Wednesday afternoon.

“We're trying to move quickly and safely so that we can begin vaccinations

for seniors,” Gelber said. “Maybe as early as Monday, we'll have transportation systems figured out and the delivery system.”

Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis held a news conference on Tuesday announcing that the state's next priority group for the vaccines would be people over 65, differing with federal recommendations that said that group should be inoculated along with essential workers.

Sonenreich said Mount Sinai has reached out to thousands of people who fit that age group, much of it done electronically, and that the hospital has the supply to start scheduling those appointments.

“We want to expend our supply as quickly as possible because I don't anticipate we're going to get resupplied until the state sees that we need it,” he said.

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## What's open, closed on Christmas Eve and Day

BY DAVID J. NEAL  
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SUPERMARKETS

**Publix:** All stores and pharmacies closing at 7 p.m. Christmas Eve and remaining closed Christmas Day.

**Winn-Dixie/Fresco Y Mas:** Closed Christmas Day.

**Sedano's:** All stores open on Christmas Eve until 6 p.m. and Christmas Day until 6 p.m. except 3925 Palm Ave. in Hialeah and 12175 SW 26th St. in West Miami-Dade, which will be open until 8 p.m.

**Milam's Market:** Closing at 7 p.m. on Christmas Eve, remaining closed Christmas Day.

**The Fresh Market:** Closing at 7 p.m. Christmas Eve, remaining closed Christmas Day.

**Whole Foods Market:** Check your favorite location, but most are closing at 7 p.m. Christmas Eve and closed Christmas Day.

**Trader Joe's:** All stores closing at 6 p.m. Christmas Eve and remaining closed Christmas Day.

DRUGSTORES

**Walgreens:** Stores open on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Location hours vary, but many are staying open until midnight. Most of the pharmacies, however, are closing at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve closed on Christmas Day.

**CVS/Navarro:** Call your location of choice for store and pharmacy hours.

BIG BOX STORES

**Walmart:** Stores may vary about Christmas Eve, but likely closing at 6 p.m. and remaining closed Christmas Day.

**Target:** Stores may vary

about Christmas Eve, but likely closing at 7 or 8 p.m. and remaining closed Christmas Day.

**Costco:** Most stores will close at 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve and remain closed Christmas Day.

**BJ's Wholesale:** Most stores will close at 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve and remain closed Christmas Day.

SHOPPING MALLS

**Aventura Mall:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**Brickell City Centre:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day, except the movie theaters and some restaurants.

**Coral Square Mall:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**Dadeland Mall:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**Dolphin Mall:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**The Falls:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**Miami International Mall:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

**Sawgrass Mills:** Open until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve, closed Christmas Day.

MASS TRANSIT

Miami-Dade: Metrobus, Metrorail and Metromover will operate on a Sunday schedule under the New Normal plan on Christmas Day. Administrative offices will be closed, but STS users can still reserve or cancel a trip at 305-871-1111.

**Broward:** Broward County Transit will operate on a Sunday/holiday schedule on Christmas Day, but no Express or Breeze bus service. Broward Main Terminal in downtown Fort

Lauderdale, 101 NW First Ave. and the Northeast Transit Center, 304 Dr. Martin Luther King Blvd. in Pompano Beach, will have customer service staff from 8:45 a.m. to 4:45 p.m. on Christmas Day.

**Tri-Rail:** Service will run on a weekend/holiday schedule.

GARBAGE

**Miami:** No garbage, bulky waste and recycling collection or services on Christmas Day. Collection and services will resume Monday.

**Miami-Dade:** For those who use county services, no garbage or recycling collection on Christmas Day. If your recycling collection falls on Christmas Day, it'll be collected on Saturday. For those in municipalities besides Miami, check with your city, but don't bet on any collection happening.

**Fort Lauderdale:** Normal collection on Christmas Eve, no collection on Christmas Day. If Friday is your normal day, your garbage will be picked up the next normal day.

**Broward County:** No garbage or recycling collection on Christmas Day for those using county services.

For those in other individual municipalities besides Fort Lauderdale, check with your city.

COURTS, COUNTY OFFICES, SCHOOLS

**Miami-Dade:** Closed Christmas Day.

**Broward:** Closed Christmas Day. The Homeless Helpline will remain open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Christmas Day.

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