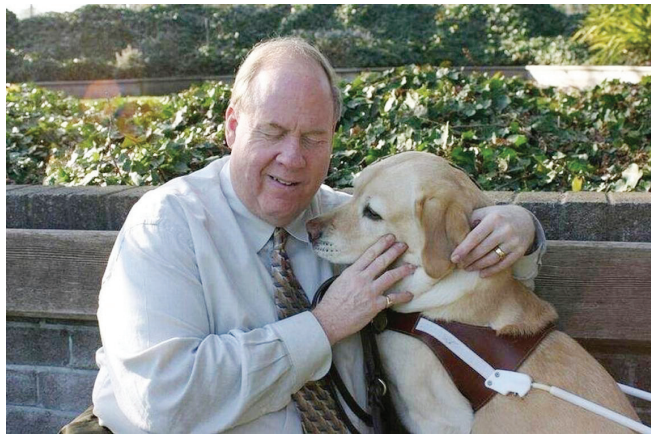


Blind author who survived 9/11 to speak at Miami Lighthouse luncheon

BY JESSE SCHECKNER – jschneckner@miamiherald.com



Bestselling author Michael Hingson, who on 9/11 escaped from the 78th floor of the World Trade Center with the help of his guide dog, Roselle, will deliver the keynote address at the 2017 See the Light Luncheon on Thursday at Riviera Country Club in Coral Gables.

A decade after the Twin Towers collapsed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11, blind survivor Michael Hingson published a memoir describing how his beloved guide dog, Roselle, helped him escape from the 78th floor of the doomed World Trade Center in New York.

“Blind since birth, Michael couldn't see a thing, but he could hear the sounds of shattering glass, falling debris, and terrified people flooding around him and his guide dog, Roselle. However, Roselle sat calmly beside him. In that moment, Michael chose to trust Roselle's judgement and not to panic. “They are a team,” stated a publisher's blurb for *Thunder Dog* on Amazon.com.

On Thursday, the bestselling author – who wrote the book after Roselle's death in 2011 – will be a guest speaker at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired's annual See the Light Luncheon, delivering the keynote address at Riviera Country Club in Coral Gables.

While Hingson promises to recount his harrowing story from that day, much of his presentation will focus on the effort to achieve equality in

a sighted world – an effort, he said, that depends on organizations like Miami Lighthouse and the inclusive attitudes they foster in their communities. “[Miami] Lighthouse teaches blind people skills to help them be as competent and capable as anyone else,” he said. “It also teaches – or tries to teach – sighted people that blind people are as competent, capable and normal as the rest of the world.”

The sales manager-turned-author and inspirational speaker will also dedicate time to explaining Aira, a new technology that pairs clients with remote agents trained to help the blind interpret the world through their phone cameras or smart glasses. In June, he announced on his website that he'd become the company's director of strategic sales. “The biggest specific roadblock that I as a blind person face, prejudice notwithstanding, is access to information,” he said. “That's doing anything from going to the store, buying a can of soup, bringing it home and being able to easily read the instructions, to going to the airport and getting from a plane to baggage claim and ground transportation.” Aira, he said, has the potential to be for the blind what lightbulbs are to sighted people in the dark. “Let's face it, you guys all use assisted technology as much as we do; you've just internalized it and made it the norm,” he said.

This year, the See the Light Luncheon will focus on early learning and the innovations being made at Miami Lighthouse's new 72,000-square-foot Lighthouse Learning Center for Children™. The center, which opened in August, houses the state's first pre-kindergarten integrating an equal percentage of legally blind and sighted young students.

[See <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/education/article168044497.html>]

Miami Lighthouse partnered with Miami-Dade County Public Schools and the Early Learning Coalition to run a piloted version of the program with 15 children in the 2016-17 school year. Forty students ages 1 to 4 are enrolled for the 2017-18 year, with a goal of recruiting 60 children next year and 80 the year after. A primary objective of the program, said Miami Lighthouse CEO Virginia Jacko, is to create the best possible scenario for visually impaired students to transition into the public school system. “Blind people tend to hang around blind people, sighted people tend to not know how to interact [with them], but when you come here you see these kids interacting and doing the same things together,” she said. “People are not their blindness.”

One of several annual fundraisers for Miami Lighthouse, the See the Light Luncheon has already attracted at least one big ticket donor. A local philanthropist, whose identity Jacko asked not to be published before the event, has pledged \$2 million to the program and will challenge the community to match her donation over the next four years. “We are very fortunate that she cares about the blind and visually impaired in Miami and is making this sustainability gift,” Jacko said. “We want people to ‘see the light’ of what Miami Lighthouse does as a transformational program.

Also, a demonstration of Aira and other technologies impactful to the visually impaired community will be held 9 a.m. Monday at Miami Lighthouse, 601 SW Eighth Ave., as part of White Cane Day. Approximately 150 people are expected to participate in the annual walk and celebration featuring food, music, guest speakers and performances by the Miami Lighthouse Music Program. For more information, visit MiamiLighthouse.org.