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Marlins Foundation hosts visually impaired teens

By Joe Frisaro and Tom Green / MLB.com

MIAMI -- Miguel Villon worked at Marlins Park on Opening Night, but that didn't compare to the experience he had Wednesday at the team's new venue.

Villon, a visually impaired 18-year-old, and a group of 15 other teenagers from Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired visited Marlins Park for a special touching tour of the stadium with the Marlins Foundation.

"It's an awesome experience," Villon said. "As an employee for the stadium, you didn't really see that much; it was just work, work, work. Now you actually get to see behind the scenes, go out on the field. It was awesome."

Miami Lighthouse is a center that has provided vision rehabilitation and eye health services to help promote independence, educate and conduct research for the last 80 years. The hands-on tour included a walk around the warning track, where the students spoke with a member of the park's grounds crew and got to feel the Bermuda grass that makes up the field at Marlins Park. The group entered the Marlins' dugout along the third-base side and got to feel where the players spend time during games.

After the tour concluded, the students and their chaperones, which included 10 instructors and Miami Lighthouse president Virginia Jacko, went to the adjoining Gold Glove and Silver Slugger suites to watch and listen to the game with the auditory assistance of a radio broadcast.

"A blind person can do anything a sighted person does -- they might just do it a little differently," said Jacko, who herself is blind and relies on her guide dog as her eyes. "When we went out on the field and touched the grass, now we have a mental picture of what that grass is like. To go into the dugout and sit where the players sit -- we got a great auditory tour, and I know that the stadium has emphasized helping the blind and disabled enjoy baseball."

As part of the multisensory experience, the students also got to feel and handle game-used equipment, including bats with pine tar, gloves, a catcher's mask, a batting helmet, balls and batting gloves, helping reinforce Miami Lighthouse's teachings -- that it is possible to see without sight.

"It was really amazing that we got to plan this," said Villon, who has been in the Lighthouse program for four years and has the most vision among Wednesday's group. "It's just really awesome for them to have this opportunity to come see a baseball game."