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Virginia Jacko uses community partnerships at Lighthouse

By ABRAHAM GALVAN

Serving over 90,000 children and families a year through programming and services, the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind & Visually Impaired's Virginia Jacko 15-year legacy as president & CEO continues – inspiring younger generations along the way.

Growing from a little bungalow house in the 1950s to a nearly 200,000-square-foot facility at 601 SW Eighth Ave., the nonprofit has created initiatives throughout the years to cater to the blind and visually impaired in Miami-Dade County.

Emphasizing in diversity, equity and inclusion, services include job readiness/placement classes, protocols manual lessons, a cortical visual impairment collaborative center and most recently the Miami Lighthouse Academy for over 80 grade school attending

students.

“We are collaborating with Nicholas Children’s Hospital Brain Institute, Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, Nova Southeastern School of Optometry and Miami Dade County Public Schools to diagnose an eye condition called cortical visual impairment referred to as CVI that prevents children to see with a visual disability, not vision disability,” Ms. Jacko said. “CVI is commonly overlooked and is misdiagnosed.”

With almost 90% of the people being serviced defined as low income and residing in a poverty zip code zone, Miami Lighthouse’s offers mostly face-to-face services, which requires leadership that really knows the needs of the community, Ms. Jacko said, “and one I would like to spotlight is Cameron Sisser, who recently was promoted from vice president to senior vice president of public



Virginia Jacko inspires younger generations as a 15-year CEO and president of the Miami Lighthouse.

relations.”

As a responsible CEO, it’s important to have a succession plan, she said, “I am grooming Cameron to be an individual who can sustain this organization and he knows our community better than anybody else. He’s a product of this community.”

Since January 2021, Mr. Sisser has been overseeing Miami Lighthouse’s Florida Heiken Program, which allows needy children to get prescription glasses free of charge. Services are offered statewide, either on-site at schools via five mobile eye clinics or by an in-network of over 1,000 participating optometrists statewide.

“When I started in 2010, the program had a contract with the Florida Department of Health for about \$160,000 and now it has expanded and we’re receiving state funds of almost \$1.75 million,” he said. “I’m super proud of that, to be able to grow it, and that means our elected officials in Tallahassee see the benefit and their return on investment.”

About 5% of low-income schoolchildren receiving a comprehensive eye exam are referred for medical intervention for retinal tears, glaucoma and other eye abnormalities that left undetected could lead to permanent vision loss, Mr. Sisser added. Approximately 73% of the nearly 130,000 children examined annually through the Heiken program required and received prescription eyeglasses, confirming the importance of a follow-up eye exam after a student fails the state-mandated vision screening.

“I always had something in-



Newly promoted Cameron Sisser learned the science in fundraising.

stilled in me, and I attribute that to my parents for always bringing me to a nonprofit organization where you’re serving food to the homeless or you’re planting gardens at the school. My parents were always very philanthropic,” he said.

Before joining the nonprofit, Mr. Sisser was working for then state senator and current Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber as a legislative aide, and “that’s why Virginia hired me really was for my government relations acumen,” he said.

“I never saw myself being integrally involved in a nonprofit,” Mr. Sisser added. “But my path has led me here and I’ve been here for a dozen years, and there’s no other nonprofit that I would work for.”

Under Ms. Jacko’s leadership, Mr. Sisser said he has grown so much, even mentoring and

guiding him to attend Indiana University Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, where he was certified in fundraising.

“If you want to take over another nonprofit, go get a fundraising certificate,” he recalls Ms. Jacko advising him. “I didn’t know there was a science behind fundraising. She brought me on for government relations and now I grew into PR, marketing and event fundraising.”

One day, Mr. Sisser said, he sees himself running a nonprofit as prestigious as Miami Lighthouse.

“She has instilled the competence in me to be able to do that,” he said. “You know, and that’s what you really need when you’re a young professional, a mentor to really tell you ‘Hey, you know you can do this’ because, if you’re not confident, you’re not going to be able to succeed.”

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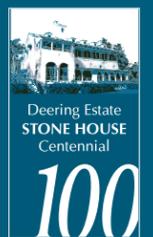
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