

Visionaries Take Miami Lighthouse for the Blind To A New Level

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In historic Little Havana, on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Sixth Street, stands an impressive four-story structure that the average person would likely not notice unless he or she were intentionally looking for it. In fact, many passersby probably do not know, and therefore can never appreciate, the remarkable story of this prestigious institution. Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired currently serves over 23,000 clients annually through a combination of education, visual rehabilitation, and job training. Recognized among the most prestigious charities in the country, Miami Lighthouse recently celebrated 90 years of service to the community.

Through the legacy of blind piano player, Dorothy “Dottie” Gamble – and with the assistance and support of her friend, the venerable Helen Keller – Miami Lighthouse started out by offering occupational and social services to its clients. Today, much of its growth and success is owed to Virginia Jacko, the first blind president and CEO in the organization’s history. A woman without sight but with limitless vision, compassion, and charisma, Jacko and her dedicated team have redefined how services to the visually impaired are delivered.

Early in her tenure Jacko employed a simple and effective strategy of running Miami Lighthouse like a major university. Creating local partnerships and securing sponsorship from donors played a key role in securing the funding needed to expand. She next focused on expanding services and raising awareness, a current example of which is being listed as a community partner for Andrea Bocelli’s annual Valentine’s concert. Finally, Jacko and her team focused on improving education for the blind.

“For our pre-school, we have a co-teaching model in every classroom: a classroom teacher and a teacher for the visually impaired. It is the first true inclusion model we are aware of in the United States. We recruit the children from the neighborhood that can be role models; the others are legally blind.”

I asked Jacko about the benefits of such a program. “We do that because too many blind people only hang around with blind people. Stevie Wonder and José Feliciano know how to function in a sighted world. The reason is because they hang around sighted people. It’s a sighted world. Our music program is an inclusion program with sighted musicians performing with blind musicians. I took that model and incorporated it into our pre-kindergarten so that we develop empathy and have role models with sighted children and blind children can function in a sighted world.”

To illustrate her point, I joined her and Eva, her beautiful black Labrador and seeing eye-dog, as we toured the facilities. We arrived on the pre-school and kindergarten floor and entered the classrooms. I watched as children happily came up to Jacko and pet Eva. As the children played and interacted with their teachers, I had to remind myself that the class was evenly divided between blind and sighted children since I could not see the difference.



Miami Lighthouse for the Blind fundraising gala event brought together Board Chair George Foyo, civic leader David Lawrence Jr., CEO Virginia Jacko, and Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Alberto Carvalho.



Miami Lighthouse CEO Virginia Jacko holds a black Labrador while she speaks to blind preschoolers. Jacko is blind herself.

As we continued the tour, Jacko pointed out that all the artwork on display in the building was created by her senior clients. Personally, I thought the pieces were far superior to a banana taped to a wall or anything else you'll find at Art Basel.

"Senior group activities are important," Jacko explained. "Too many blind people will just stay home. They lose their independence and become dependent on family members or enter assisted living. We prevent that by giving them somewhere to go and something to do."

"The other day, one of our clients told me rich people have their country clubs; we have more than that, for us, Miami Lighthouse is our country club."

As I interacted with the people in the senior activities center, I noticed a wide range of handmade jewelry, paintings, and sculptures, each one completely unique and beautiful. One man was halfway through crocheting an American flag. How he had allocated the stars and stripes in their correct location without the use of his eyes was impressive and beyond my comprehension.

While speaking with some of the seniors in the activity room, I realized that everything about Jacko's statement was true. This was more than a community center. For many members, this was their connection to the sighted world.

It was at that moment that I truly understood the importance of Miami Lighthouse's mission. It is not enough to accommodate access and services for the blind and visually impaired. It is our responsibility as a community to actively build an environment where they can where they can continue to contribute to that community. Our first step should be the continued support of organizations such as Miami Lighthouse. sWith a leader like blind visionary Virginia Jacko, it shouldn't be too hard.

Supporting Miami Lighthouse has never been easier. Visit www.miamilighthouse.org to learn how you can volunteer, donate, or simply spread the word on social media. For more information about services provided by Miami Lighthouse, call (305) 856-2288.



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