

MIAMI TODAY

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SERVING SOUTH FLORIDA'S MOST IMPORTANT AUDIENCE

Virginia Jacko was more than two decades into her career as a financial and administrative executive at Purdue University when she began having trouble reading printed documents. The contrast was off, she said, but the problem was that only she saw it.

She visited an eye doctor who referred her to the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami. The trip proved fateful.

"Little did I know at the time that there was a gentleman named Dr. Bascom Palmer who was chairman of the board of a place called the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind," she said. "If only there was some foreshadowing, I'd be like, 'Wow.'"

The prognosis for her condition was serious. The degenerative eye disease she had, doctors said, could lead to total blindness. Her daughter, whose research focused on digital readability for the visually impaired, recommended that she relocate here and attend Miami Lighthouse, the first agency in the United States to rehabilitate adults for mainstream competitive employment.

On Jan. 3, 2000, she started as a client. By the time she finished learning Braille, all her eyesight but for the ability to detect a small amount of light was gone. But by then she'd found her passion.

"I needed to help the blind," she said. "I thought if they only ran the place like a university, it could be so much."

Over the next five years, she volunteered, first giving speeches and doing whatever work needed doing. Ultimately, she was invited to join the board of directors and, after a couple meetings, she became its treasurer.

Almost five years to the day that she first walked through Miami Lighthouse's doors, the nonprofit's then-CEO abruptly left. Ms. Jacko was asked to serve as interim CEO. After six months, during which she led work on a slew of successful grant proposals, she officially became Miami Lighthouse's first blind president and CEO.

Ms. Jacko in the 15 years since has increased program participation at Miami Lighthouse fiftyfold, grown its physical space nearly five times over and spear-headed partnerships and mergers to vastly expand its reach.

THE ACHIEVER



Virginia Jacko

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Born: Racine, Wisconsin

Age: "Just type down 'vintage.'"

Education: Master of health and
human sciences, Purdue University,
1975; bachelor of business adminis-
tration, Loyola University of Chicago,
1964.

Personal Philosophy: "Don't waste
time."

For 12 straight years, Miami Lighthouse has had a four-star rating on Charity Navigator, ranking among the top 1% of nonprofits nationwide based on its strong financial base and broad transparency.

"I've had the privilege to prove that a totally blind person could achieve and be a great CEO, not defined as a blind CEO but a CEO who just happens to be blind,"

she said. "Miami Lighthouse helped me learn that when I lost eyesight, I didn't lose vision."

Ms. Jacko spoke by phone with reporter Jesse Scheckner.

Q: You led the organization from a two- to a four-star rating on Charity Navigator and significantly grew its participants, programs and members. How did you do that?

A: Because of my strong financial background, I'm always looking at the metrics, at the numbers. There are too many nonprofits where donors feel uncomfortable when they see fancy executive offices and an army of people doing a job a couple people could do.

We had about 45 employees when I began. We had 130 W-2s last year, but the growth is all on the program side. We don't have a chief development officer. I'm it. We're lean and mean. That's important for nonprofits.

When I began as CEO, at the end of that prior fiscal year the number of program participants was less than 500. This past year, the number was 25,000.

To accommodate that, you must be able to grow your financial base and your facility. I had a significant number of capital campaigns whereby we increased the size of our physical plant by 4.7 times. When we finish this new campaign now, we'll have gone from 30,000 to 143,000 square feet of modern classrooms.

The unmet need is huge. Back in 2005 and before, the unmet need was not being addressed. But there was another unmet need: preventing blindness.

In 2007, we merged a program called the Heiken Children's Vision Program – conceived and run by the Miami-Dade Optometric Association – with the help of the Health Foundation of South Florida and the Dr. John T. MacDonald Foundation.

We purchased mobile clinics on wheels whereby we could go to schools, and when a child didn't pass their vision, we provide dilated eye exams with our network of optometrists and prescription glasses.

There are almost 400 schools in Miami-Dade. Prior to Covid, we went to at least 75% every year with a mobile clinic to help children struggling in school because

Virginia Jacko looks at a final property addition in the block...

they couldn't see.

The Health Foundation paid for a survey recently. We gave them names this past year of families where their child got a dilated eye exam and glasses from our program. Nearly 80% confirmed their child was doing better in school because of the program.

Our relationship with Miami-Dade Public Schools is extremely important. We looked at our seniors. Twenty percent with vision loss also don't have a high school diploma. Miami-Dade Schools adult education teachers come to the Lighthouse to work with these adults to get their GED.

At our Miami Lighthouse Learning Center, which we opened in 2016, children from ages 1 through first grade are provided a regular school. This past year, we provided daily education to 60 children, following the bell-to-bell of Miami-Dade Public Schools.

We also collaborate with them to ensure that our distance learning curriculum and what they're doing is accessible for students that have a vision impairment.

Q: What's the status of the \$4.5 million matching challenge that launched last year to expand the Lighthouse Learning Center for Children?

A: It's a \$9 million project. A donor agreed to provide \$4.5 million. We have to raise \$4.5 million. We'll have shovels in the ground in September and will open our doors August 2021.

We're working with a community development entity called Enterprise under a US Treasury initiative called New Market Tax Credit. This will be supported by federal funds, two matching challenges and our generous Miami donor community.

Under Covid, when we open our doors in October and have to do six-foot distancing, we'll have to close our Braman lunchroom and mother's playday room. We can only have 10 students and then the teachers in classrooms.

How can I say to a parent of a blind 4-year-old or kindergartener, "I'm sorry, we have no room for your child"? That will happen. But for some divine providence, we had this capital campaign, and the city has been very good. Hopefully our construction permit is released.

Q: Can you tell me more about the school?

A: The center started in 2016 as a pilot project with 15 pre-K students, half blind, half typically developing.



Virginia Jacko was already a successful executive when Miami Lighthouse aided her.

I found, once I was blind, that too often sighted people did not know how to interact with a blind person and a blind person didn't know how to interact with a sighted world. At a young age, empathy is so important.

We gradually grew to 60 pre-K students. Now that we've added kindergarten and first grade, under a contract with Miami-Dade Schools, that is only for blind children.

Q: Who manages the school curriculum, and is it a public school, private school or something else?

A: We are not a charter school. We are a private entity with a subcontract from the Miami-Dade school board. We have a principal assigned to us, but the principal is not on campus. We just meet with him.

We also have meetings with the person from Miami-Dade Schools who is a head of students with disabilities. They just oversee.

We have to follow the individualized educational plan of every child. I have 12 Florida-licensed teachers. We have teacher assistants and physical, occupational and speech therapy.

Dr. Diane De Angelis is our curriculum specialist. Isabel Chica is director of the children's programs. We have a highly credentialed team to the extent that the University of Miami is doing a longitudinal study on us.

The Journal of Vision Impairment and

Blindness, the go-to archival, peer-reviewed journal for vision impairment, has an article coming out that has to do with the findings of the university.

One of the findings has to do with student empathy compared to other pre-Ks throughout the nation with typically developing students. The degree of empathy here is phenomenal. Parent engagement and parent-teacher involvement is way above average.

We want to have national best practices. We had an article come out a year ago in the British Journal of Vision Impairment pertaining to our seniors program, teaching people how to live with low vision.

We cover the entire spectrum. Our blind babies program has 110 blind babies in it. Our programs take a person from preventing blindness and blind babies all the way to adults and seniors.

Q: How are sighted students selected to attend the school?

A: We focus on low-income children who live in the neighborhood and, if we have any, employees who have children at that age.

Q: What areas does Miami Lighthouse currently serve?

A: We serve all of Miami-Dade. Our Heiken Children's Vision Program is state-wide. We have collaborative agreements in 61 counties. We have five mobile clinics that travel throughout the state.

Our first priority is Miami, so on an

...in leading Miami Lighthouse for the Blind to further growth

annual basis, at least 10,000 Miami schoolchildren referred to us will receive a dilated eye exam. We provide another 4,000 children with blindness prevention, dilated eye exams and glasses in other counties.

Every month, we Skype and collaborate with a sister school in Petah Tikvah, Israel, a learning center only for blind children. They're interested in different eye diseases, like cortical vision impairment, something typical for premature infants.

Many of their professionals are volunteers. We were going to create a residency program whereby they can come and learn from us. The funding for that kind of got stalled because our priorities slightly changed.

We are a national gem. To be able to create the best practices for the rest of the profession is important. We also have no relationship with any other Lighthouse.

We're not like the Red Cross. Sometimes people think we're one big organization. We aren't. We're colleagues, but we're separate corporations.

Q: What other plans do you have for more physical growth of Lighthouse facilities?

A: There's one more property on the block we're interested in purchasing. Then we'll own the entire block. That'll just be perfect.

May God keep me healthy and may that happen while I'm leading the organization. I want to be the chief executive when we finish that.

Q: What is your biggest challenge in the pandemic?

A: I worry about the people we serve. That is why we created, with the help of a couple donors, a client sustainability fund. The blind are so vulnerable.

If you're a blind person and live alone, how do you go to a food-distribution center? If you live with someone – I got a call about a married couple, one blind and one sighted, about the sighted spouse having to go into isolation. They wanted to know what they should do with the blind person.

I got a call two days ago about a homeless man. All homeless people have to go into isolation, apparently, for two weeks before a Camillus House or Chapman Partnership-type place will take them. The question was, "How can we orient this blind person to the hotel while they're isolated?"

We did food distribution recently. The

Delta Gamma sorority gave us \$700. We went to [restaurateur] Steve Perricone and asked, for that price, how many meals he could make. We wanted to deliver them to families.

The photo the Associated Press picked up was a little blind boy opening his hands on the doorstep of their very humble house accepting the food delivery.

Q: How has the pandemic impacted your funding?

A: It's twofold. The tax law changed so that, on a person's W-2, you can deduct from your adjusted gross income without having to fill out a Schedule A, \$300 of donations.

That's new under the Cares Act. I say to people, "Why give your money to Uncle Sam? Give it to the blind."

The other thing is extremely wealthy people used to be able to deduct 50%-60% of their adjusted gross income. Now they can deduct 100% of their adjusted gross income for their philanthropic giving.

The federal government has tried to help. But at the same time, if we're at a 10% unemployment rate, it's difficult for some people to write a \$50 check. They need that for groceries.

Our donations of course they're down. But there are people in the community who for a variety of reasons haven't been impacted. I hope they continue to give.

Q: The Lighthouse in the past has relied on events for fundraising.

A: Yes. For example, our Heiken Children's Vision Program, we would have Music Under the Stars: BonAppétit Miami always in May. We typically net about \$35,000. We turned that into a virtual event. While many people donated, we raised just \$4,000.

Our main fundraiser is a luncheon we hold every October. That will be virtual. Normally we raise a six-digit figure. We'd be lucky to raise a five-digit figure.

It will be held Oct. 29 and feature Willy Chirino and his two daughters, the Chirino Sisters, of whom one was working in our music department and one is my administrative assistant.

They're going to put on a virtual performance. Because Willy Chirino is so popular in Miami, I think we'll have viewers. We'll call it a preview of our luncheon. Hopefully, if there's a vaccine in February, around Valentine's Day we can have the actual luncheon.

Q: Charity Navigator shows that in

2018, more than 65% of Miami Lighthouse's annual budget came from contributions, gifts and grants compared to 35% from government aid. Is that split ideal?

A: When they show that split, they call the Children's Trust grants government because it comes from our property taxes. That would be funding from the Florida Division of Blind Services, Florida Department of Health, Florida Department of Transportation, Miami-Dade Schools, which is really the Florida Department of Education, the Children's Trust and Miami-Dade County.

The split actually was maybe 70% grants and 30% government, but it's close enough. If we're relying that much on grants and contributions, we must continue to work very hard.

Our yield rate on our grant proposals is very good because I have tremendous experience from working at a university on how to write a grant proposal, how to have a good logic model, etc.

But I worry government funding will decrease. With the burden on the State of Florida not having all that sales tax revenue, it's going to be a new ballgame.

Q: Miami Lighthouse last year did a website audit of every candidate for the US presidency. Some had decently accessible websites. Others were found lacking. Have you since circled back to see which candidates shored up those deficiencies?

A: We just got in touch with the chief information officer of the Biden campaign and the chief technology officer of the Trump campaign.

We're giving each an opportunity to make their websites more accessible. We anticipate hearing from them in the very near future so, optimistically, we can say they fixed what they did. In the event they don't, we'll come out with op-eds in media.

That was such a unique thing we did. Time and Forbes covered it. The premier industry journal, PRWeek, every year awards the best campaign of the year by for-profits and nonprofits.

Our campaign, "Blind People Use Technology Too," beat out Sesame Street and the March for Life for PRWeek's nonprofit campaign of the year award.

That's transformational. It benefits the candidate and the voter. There are 30 million seniors. One out of four is affected by age-related eye disease. They may not be defined as blind, but something so simple

as installing a widget on the website – just a toggle – will switch so you can increase the font size or change the color contrast.

It's good business for these candidates, and right now neither Biden nor Trump has installed a widget so that a voting senior with vision loss who's struggling while looking at a monitor, trying to see what's on their website can see it better.

That's just one example of why they should be doing this. But also, when

candidates put on their websites their commitment to people with disabilities, the blind are forgotten too often.

Q: What was the last good book you read, and what is your favorite book?

A: My favorite book is the last one I read. I read auditorily. I wish I could say I read in Braille. I still read Braille like a first grader. It's like a foreign language; use it or lose it.

It was "Franklin and Winston" by John

Meacham. I love that book. Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill were extremely close during critical times for the world.

I learned how important it is to have what I'll call a soulmate. They were closer to each other than they were to their wives.

It's the best book I ever read because I don't want to be known as a blind CEO, and President Roosevelt did not want to be known as a president in a wheelchair.

