

Miami Lighthouse marks 80th birthday with dinner concert

BY RACHEL TANNENBAUM

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, Florida's largest and oldest agency serving the blind, is celebrating its 80th birthday with a sold-out Ruby Jubilee dinner concert Saturday featuring eight-time Grammy winner José Feliciano performing with the Miami Lighthouse musicians.

"There is an increase in uncorrectable eye loss, when glasses won't work, for ages at all ends of the spectrum," said Virginia Jacko, president and CEO of Miami Lighthouse.

The 7 p.m. ceremony at the Biltmore Hotel in Coral Gables honors donors who have given or pledged at least \$80,000 to Miami Lighthouse. Ms. Jacko said participation with Miami Lighthouse has increased fourteen-fold in the past five years.

Miami Lighthouse serves nearly 10,000 program participants annually. It has received a four-star ranking from Charity Navigator four years in a row, placing it among a select 8% of not-for-profit institutions in the US.

Ms. Jacko, author of the "The Blind Visionary," is totally blind herself. She said about 75% of



Photo by Marlene Quaroni

President Virginia Jacko works with a client at the Miami Lighthouse.

the people attending the dinner are quite familiar with the work of Miami Lighthouse and she wants to increase awareness for the other 25%.

Ms. Jacko said that the Miami Lighthouse helps the visually impaired of all ages with a variety of eye problems. Forty-eight percent of babies 20-24 weeks have a disability among which blindness and deafness are most common. This often relates to the retina not being fully developed, according to the Florida Association of Agencies Serving the Blind.

At the other end of the spec-

trum, Ms. Jacko said people are living longer, and diabetes is becoming more of a problem. She said 30% of the adult blind and visually impaired clients of the Miami Lighthouse have diabetes.

As for seniors, Ms. Jacko wants those with vision problems to be able to stay mobile and be able to work to continue to live on their own.

"We want people to know that they can be helped," she said.

A 2007 merger with the Dr. Bruce Heiken Fund led to the creation of the Florida Heiken

Children's Vision Program LLC, a subsidiary of Miami Lighthouse that provides free eye exams and free glasses for schoolchildren through a contract with the state Department of Health and the Better Chance Music Production Program, according to a press release.

Ms. Jacko said children who are financially disadvantaged, children without insurance, fail school vision tests but can't afford to get the correction needed.

"Miami Lighthouse comes in with its four mobile units and gives free eye exams to students," Ms. Jacko said. "So far Miami Lighthouse has given about 7,500 children eye exams this year and 75% of those students needed glasses."

The Miami Lighthouse Better Change Music Production Program, launched in 2010, is funded through the Knight Foundation Arts Challenge. Ms. Jacko said 55 participants and instructors will be performing side-by-side with Mr. Feliciano at the dinner. The sixth Miami Lighthouse album, "See the Light," produced in the program's own Henry and Inez Stone Music & Sound Studio, is to be released at the event.



Eight-time Grammy winner Jose Feliciano will perform and pick up an honorary Miami-Dade diploma.

Ms. Jacko said Mr. Feliciano has been motivational for the students. She said he told the students it's important to stay in school because he personally never finished high school.

When Ms. Jacko learned that he never had received a high school diploma; she approached Alberto Carvalho, Miami-Dade Schools Superintendent. Mr. Feliciano will be awarded an honorary diploma from Miami-Dade County Public Schools at the dinner concert.

Said Ms. Jacko, "José told me that this is the greatest award he has ever received."