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Head of Miami Lighthouse for Blind given Concern award

By STEPHANIE NICHOLAS

Virginia Jacko first became acquainted with the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind as a client.

Those were the days when she was learning how to navigate as a blind person after a rare disease robbed her of her eyesight.

Today, Jacko, of Coconut Grove, runs the Lighthouse -- and won this month the Health Foundation of South Florida's \$25,000 Concern Award for her efforts to make it into a top-notch organization.

"Virginia Jacko is an outstanding individual who exemplifies the type of person who deserves this award. I have known Virginia Jacko half a dozen years and there is not anybody more deserving in the health industry," said Arthur Hertz who nominated her.

Jacko, though, is much more modest.

"The first words that came to my mind -- that I was a finalist, not that I had won -- was that I am extremely humbled," Jacko said.

But others admire her for forging ahead and helping other blind people thrive in a world that does not always see the challenges of visually handicapped.

Jacko began to slowly lose her eyesight in the 1990s, when she was director of fiscal affairs at Purdue University in Indiana.

She found out that she had retinitis pigmentosa, a rare eye disease that occurs first with the loss of peripheral vision.

In 2001, she moved to Miami at the suggestion of her daughter who, as an engineer at Florida International University, had done a project with the Miami Lighthouse.

"I walked through the door saying, 'I hope they can help me,'" Jacko said.

At the Lighthouse, Jacko had to learn new ways to do everything, from threading a needle to using the computer.

"I remember the first time with a cane, and I walked by myself to Walgreens. It was a tremendous feeling of freedom," she said. "Those experiences of knowing I was confident enough to have my independence were also part of the rehabilitation experience."

After her rehabilitation, she became the treasurer for Miami Lighthouse. Then in 2005, Miami Lighthouse asked her to step in as president while it conducted a national search.

Midway through, the search committee asked her to put her name in as a candidate. She was immediately

chosen to run the organization.

"I followed my passion, which is a gift," Jacko said.

As president and CEO, Jacko has introduced new programs in music production, ceramics and fitness.

Contributions also have doubled, and she helped bring in the single largest donation of \$1.1 million, from local philanthropist and businesswoman Gloria Martin.

When Jacko first started, Miami Lighthouse was ranked as a two-star charity by the National Charity Ranking Service.

In 2006, the organization earned four stars, the highest ranking from the service. Last year it earned another four stars.

Only 18 percent of nonprofit charities in the United States have earned a four-star ranking for two years in a row, Jacko said.

And Miami Lighthouse had the highest ranking for agencies providing services for the blind.

Jacko has won other awards for her work and she is grateful that her latest honor, the Concern Award, recognizes not only her work but that of Miami Lighthouse.

"An award like this helps the Miami Lighthouse. It gives the donors the recognition they deserve," Jacko said.