

## **DCPS VISION SERVICES PROGRAM – FACTS:**

**By – Dot Mathias – Vision Clinician**

**February 1971** – I was Health Chairman for the DCC of PTAs/PTSAs and was contacted by Superintendent Cecil Hardesty on the status of Vision Screening in Duval County. I had no idea! He requested a survey be conducted in all schools to determine the extent of vision screening in Duval County.

- The results indicated a limited and fragmented vision screening program existed.
- He initiated immediate plans for a comprehensive screening program. The program was placed under the Associate Superintendent of Operations, Billy Parker; and the Director of Pupil Personnel Services Dr. John Kennedy; and I was appointed Program Consultant.
- A Steering Committee was formed which included the following: Ophthalmologists Drs. Thomas Edwards – Howard Rose – and Robert Schnipper – Optometrist: Dr. Pierce Drohan – Optician: John Wilcox; - representative from the State Division of Health's Child Care Department – the Lion's Club – Gwen Stewart, Master Reading Teacher – President of the Duval County Council of PTAs/PTSAs, Marjorie Douglas – and I was appointed Chairman of the Steering Committee.
- An office was set up for Gwen and myself in the old Duval High School building. Gwen was appointed Vision Clinician and I was appointed Program Consultant and Chairman of the Steering Committee (non salaried).
- Many meetings were held to develop a district-wide coordinated vision screening program.
- Under the auspices of the medical advisory committee FORMS were revised....and revised. Finally all FORMS were completed and approved by the Medical Advisory committee.
- We were ready to begin screenings except for one major problem...who would actually do the screenings??
- As Health Chairman for the Council...I presented the program to the Duval County Council of PTAs/PTSAs at their first Council meeting of the year and the Council immediately voted to adopt the program and agreed to provide the volunteers for their schools to be trained by me.

- The Council also set up a fund to provide for children from indigent families who could not afford an eye examination or glasses.

**September, 1971** – We were off and running! A pilot project was held at San Mateo Elementary school which confirmed the Superintendent's suspicion that DCPS was in dire need of a system-wide, coordinated, vision program.

- It then became my job to reach out to the medical community to provide eye examinations and/or glasses to children from indigent families at a reduced cost to the Council.
- At that time, the general public was not too happy with the DCPS school system. The Superintendent called me to his office again and stated he wanted this program to be the first by the Duval County school district to "Bridge the Gap" with the community – uniting the community – the public schools - the medical community – health agencies – school nurses – and volunteers. A trusting and lasting partnership was established and it has grown stronger through the years.

**1972** – I became a part time employee of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness. I received training in Tampa, Florida on the techniques of vision screening under Kay Wooster, Program Consultant, for the Florida Chapter of the National Society for the Prevention of Blindness.

**1975** – Gwen Stewart retired and I became the appointed Vision Clinician. As the program grew – it became obvious additional help was needed. Through a contractual agreement with Prevent Blindness and due to my recommendation – Dr. Gunning (then Superintendent) allowed me to employ three part time vision coordinators and a new part time Program Consultant. The Vision Team consisted of: Barbara Blair, Program; and Joann DiGiandomenico (DeJohn); June Baumgardner; and Bootsie Rhoden as Vision Coordinators.

**1978** – I secured a grant from Prevent Blindness entitled, "New Eyes for the Needed". The grant enabled us to service 89 students from needy families.

**1983** – I met with representatives from the Downtown and Arlington Lion's Clubs – they provided eye exams and glasses for 27 students from indigent families. That same year, I was able to persuade Nemours and Shands Hospitals to provide eye examinations to 33 children from needy families.

- Pat Howard, school psychologist – Ann Hinkle, Supervisor Home Bound program, and myself met with Dr. Robert Hered, Director of children's Ophthalmological Department Nemours Children's Hospital. I had written guidelines for a functional literacy test for vision and wanted his approval. He approved and we continue to use this test today....when necessary. This was the beginning of many years of a professional friendship. Dr.

Hered called me periodically to review and get my opinion on various vision programs being offered to Duval County.

- Met with Dr. Brooker, Ophthalmologist, and Shands Hospital. He provided eye exams for 83 children from indigent families and became a valuable resource to the vision program.

**September 1986** – Herb Sang, Superintendent – wanted me to become the official Vision Clinician for the DCPS. I did not want to be a 12 month employee so Superintendent Sang had my schedule arranged in order for me to work on a 10 month basis.

**1988** – I applied for and received a grant for \$10,000 from the Eye Research Foundation. The same year I spoke with the Mayport Wives Club and they contributed \$1,000 to the vision program.

**1991** – Because of my concern with not being certificated I went to Larry Zenke (then Superintendent) and expressed my concerns. Dr. Zenke said I did not need a certificate due to my 14 years of training and screening with Prevent Blindness, however, to alleviate my concerns he would issue me a **SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS CERTIFICATE**....this certificate was good for five years,

- As we neared the 5 year mark - I again went to Dr. Zenke, he told me to quit worrying about a certificate-he said my 14 years of work with the Prevent Blindness Association – the fact Suwanee and Hamilton Counties requested me to train their County School Nurses on the technique of vision screening – also, teaching the vision portion of the new Guidance Counselors workshop – training the volunteers on the “how to’s” of vision screening in their schools - and teaching a class to the student nurses at FSCJ (requested by Linda Hunter, Supervisor of Nursing)as well as teaching a class to the student nurses at UNF (requested by Bill Ahern, Director of Nursing). These student nurses assist DCPS with vision screening in the low socio-economic areas of the city where volunteers were few and far between.
- Dr. Zenke said with just the things mentioned....in his opinion, I would have accrued enough credits to have at least a Master's degree - had I gone to college. He said I would be considered a specialist – unfortunately this was never conveyed to payroll department.

**1992** – Dr. Barbara Wessling – Paul Kostokus – and Jackie Bopp were assigned to write a program for vision services to lighten our load. Dr. Wessling said she was amazed at the amount of work we had. She said we handled more schools and more students then any other department in the school district.

- This was a record year! Students screened – 80,677 and 7,617 referred - 2,262 trained volunteers assisted with screening in 145 schools.

**1993** – I received a certificate from Nemours Foundation for “effects of impaired vision on early development”– by Lea Hyvarinen, M.D. – developer of the Lea Eye Chart.

**1994** – I met and spoke with a number of business – organizations – and individuals about the vision program: Cedar Bay CoGenerating Co., Frank Stallwood, CEO , contributed \$3,000; the Swingin’ Saints Square Dance Club \$218.00; Riverview Masonic Lodge - \$200.00; the McMillan Family - \$500.00; the Pickle Family - \$400.00; and Dr. John Kennedy - \$100.00.

**1996** –The contractual arrangement with Prevent Blindness was transferred to a newly formed organization named Vision Is Priceless. As a charter member of this organization I served on the committee that selected the name....Vision Is Priceless (aka) VIP.

- Because of my work in the vision field...VIP made me one of their **VISIONARIES**. And also established an award in my name. The “Dot Mathias” award is presented each year at VIP’s annual meeting - to a person or organization performing outstanding work in the field of vision for the DCPS vision program.

**1999** – Disaster struck – the Title One social worker were transferred to another department – as well as, the Title One funding – Title One Bus- and all four vision coordinators. Our computers were not Y2K and had to be re-programmed – as if that wasn’t enough – screening schedules had to be delayed due to Hurricane Floyd. Funds were depleted in the Duval County Council of PTAs/PTSAs vision account due to the loss of Title One funds.

- The Duval County Council of PTAs/PTSAs hastened to raise monies for the program – I contacted businesses and individuals who contributed funds., Mr. Hodges Sneed (our then, director) recognized our plight and allowed me to employ and train 4 new coordinators - adding one additional coordinator to make up for the loss of the social workers. The new coordinators were Edie Brooks - Martha Boston – Pat Rioux – Susie Chisholm – and Kay Reese. These coordinators met the challenges with excellent job performance – and we were back in business again!

**2000** –I met with Pam Paul, Director of the Jacksonville Children’s Commission, seeking additional funds for the vision program. Pam assured me if Council would fill out the application a grant would be forth-coming.

- The grant came through in the amount of \$24,040 which was distributed to the 5 city-wide CPACs. I was required to meet with each CPAC to assure

them the money would be spent for students in their CPAC boundaries. This entailed a lot of bookkeeping but it was worth it.

**2001** – 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Vision Services program- over 2,000,000 students reaped the benefits from the annual screening for early identification of vision problems and 150,000 were referred for follow-up service aimed toward correcting these problems.

**2001** – Pat Rioux had to resign to seek full time employment. I then hired and trained **TRACY SCOTT** as a replacement for Pat.

**2004** – The Health Service Rule, Chapter 64F-6003, FAC was amended to include sixth grade students. The first week in January, 2005 the 7<sup>th</sup> grades were deleted from vision screening and 6<sup>th</sup> grades were included.

**2004 – The Philadelphia Eagles football team** played in the **SUPER BOWL** here in Jacksonville. Three of their players – Jermane Mayberry – Leto Jackson – and Brian Dawkins – attended elementary schools here. They remembered the vision program and wanted to bring their “Vision Mobile” Unit here to provide eye exams and glasses, if needed, to children from financially disadvantaged families. Not only did they provide eye exams and glasses to students in three schools they had attended (Annie R. Morgan – S.P. Livingston – and Martin Luther King) but they brought their book-mobile and provided age appropriate books to every child in all three schools.

- A couple of years later when the Eagles were again in the play-offs for the Super Bowl to be played in Tampa, Fl. The Executive Director called me – aid if they won they would be coming through Jacksonville and wanted to bring their “Vision Van” back to Jacksonville and once again provide a professional eye examination to students attending schools in a low-socio economic area. Much to our chagrin they lost and the “VisionVan” stayed in Philadelphia.

**2004 –The Neptune Beach Elementary school Dad’s Club volunteered to assist with the vision screening at their school. They purchased additional Sloan Letter cards and Lea cards for the Snellen Charts and repaired 10 broken Snellen Charts.**

**In the same year** – Lenscrafter’s contacted me they were bringing their “Vision Van” to Regency Square for two days and wanted me to schedule students, from near-by schools, **whose parents** could not afford an eye exam and they had been referred from our screenings. They provided 65 eye examinations and glasses to children from indigent families.

**2007** – Lenscrafter’s of Regency cognizant of the importance of the Vision Services program in Duval County contacted (this was the parent company) me and volunteered to bring their Vision Van from their parent company, Luxottica Group Foundation (home based in Cincinnati, Ohio) for a two day stay. The van was located at Parkwood Heights Elementary school and provided eye examinations and glasses to 120 students from indigent families from Arlington Middle School – Gregory Drive Elementary – and Parkwood Heights Elementary School.

**2008** – The Luxottica Van only visits a city once every 5 years – however, the following year I received a call from the Luxottica Foundation wanting to come back to Jacksonville – they said the reason they wanted to come back to our city so soon was because we were so organized!

**2009** – Everest University student nurses joined the Duval County Public school Vision Services program. This brings a total of 4 colleges based in Jacksonville working in partnership with the DCPS Vision Services Team: FSCJ – UNF – Sanford Brown –and Everest University.

**2011** – I received the distinct honor of being installed on the Health Advisory Board of FSCJ.

**2012** –The highlight of this year was the Essilor Vision Foundation joined with DCPS Vision Program. Essilor had new Optical equipment delivered to Longbranch Elementary school. The Media Center was set up to mirror an Optometrist office. Essilor’s only request was that we conduct the school-wide screening prior to their arrival and we send only the referrals to them. Thirty-nine students were referred and received a professional examination and glasses.

**2012** – The second highlight of the year was being honored at the August 7, 2012 School Board meeting by Superintendent Ed Pratt-Dannals with the presentation of a beautiful plaque for my work with the Vision program.

- The dedication of the volunteers – the medical community – the vision coordinators – are unsurpassed, We deeply appreciate all of the services provided by the Ophthalmologist – Optometrist – OPTICIANS – Nemour’s Children Clinic – the Andrew Jackson Student Nurses –the School Nurses – The University of North Florida Student Nurses –the North Campus FSCJ Student Nurses-the Sanford Brown Student Nurses – the Health Department – the Division of Blind Services -the Baptist Health – the Duval County Council of PTAs/PTSAs – and the many other community agencies who work in partnership with the Duval County Public School Vision Services Program.

**ADDENDUM:**

This report does not cover the thousands of dollars the Duval County Council has contributed to their vision fund to provide the Gift of Sight to the students attending the Duval County Public School. To date no child whose parents requested assistance, and they did not have Medicaid, has been left unaided.

Nor does it cover the many Health Fairs we have been asked to participate with throughout the years.

Nor does it include the many speaking engagements I've been invited to promoting the Vision Service Program.