

# BISCAYNE BAY Community Newspapers

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Connecting Communities

## Miami Lighthouse for the Blind celebrates playground construction, expansion project

BY DAVID STIEFEL

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Wednesday, Mar. 22, in celebration of its playground expansion, the final phase of the Miami Lighthouse Academy multi-year construction project to support the innovative school's classroom growth.

Completion of newly expanded playground came a year after the opening of a new 30,000-square-foot interior classroom expansion to the existing 115,000-square-foot school facility. Miller Construction received an Association of Builders and Contractors Excellence Eagle Award in recognition of the project's great design, execution, safety and quality, as determined by an independent panel.

"We designed all our new facilities to reflect the mission of the Miami Lighthouse Academy, providing our visually impaired and sighted students with a safe, child-oriented environment with a wide array of tactile experiences through which toddlers and young children can learn about the world around them in an engaging and fun way," said Virginia Jacko, Miami Lighthouse president and CEO.

The opening of the expanded Owen S. Freed Playground provides abundant green space with separate areas for early learners, early elementary school children and older school children. The playground features an open field with colorful portable outdoor picnic tables and umbrellas funded by Rebecca Sosa, former Miami-Dade County Commissioner. The playground has extensive perimeter trees to provide shade, courtesy of Dixie Landscape and Raquel Regalado, Miami-Dade County Commissioner.

The entire playground area is protected by a 6-foot concrete masonry wall reinforced to mitigate vehicular impact. Sally Heyman, former Miami-Dade



*Dignitaries cut the ribbon officially opening the Owen S. Freed Playground for Miami Lighthouse Academy students. Pictured (l-r) are Marcel Morlote, vice-president, Wolfberg Alvarez & Partners; Shelby Reamer of Dixie Landscape; Miami-Dade County Commissioner Raquel Regalado; Sally Heyman, former Miami-Dade County Commissioner; Virginia Jacko, president and CEO Miami Lighthouse; Harley Miller, CEO Miller Construction Company; Sue Reamer of Dixie Landscape, and Charles Nielson, chair of the board, Miami Lighthouse.*

County Commissioner, arranged the funding of this most important aspect of the playground, and Miller Construction and Wolfberg Alvarez & Partners were responsible for construction and design of the playground expansion project.

With research funding from The Children's Trust, University of Miami faculty and Miami Lighthouse have been conducting a collaborative longitudinal study of the impact of Miami Lighthouse Academy LLC inclusion preschool and pre-kindergarten for early learners. The most recent results of the study found that interactions between teachers and students exceeded national averages for pre-K and preschool classes, that students improved their social and peer

interaction skills, and that students have higher empathy scores after being enrolled for longer than a year.

Miami Lighthouse is the oldest and largest private agency in Florida assisting persons of all ages who are blind and visually impaired. Today, the agency serves more than 25,000 clients per year with an array of programs that enable blind and visually impaired persons to achieve independence.

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind is located at 601 SW Eighth Ave. For more information about Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired, and the Miami Lighthouse Academy, visit [MiamiLighthouse.org](http://MiamiLighthouse.org), or call 305-856-2288.