Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program receives honors

By Marilyn Bowden

The Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program, a division of Miami Lighthouse for the Blind, in 2011 received the South Florida Business Journal Excellence in Health Care Award in the Community Outreach category.

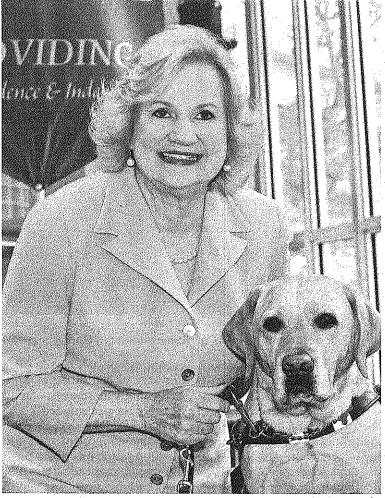
The award recognizes a dramatic increase in the number of children receiving free eye examinations and eyeglasses through Heiken over the past three years.

For this, the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program was given the Bronze Medal for Organizations in the 2012 Miami Today Gold Medals competition.

Receiving the award was Virginia Jacko, president of both the Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program and the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind & Visually Impaired.

"In 2007," Ms. Jacko says, "we merged with the Bruce Heiken Fund, a program started by the Miami-Dade Optometric Physician's Association in honor of an optometrist killed in an accident. The concern was that nothing was being done for children who fail vision tests at school because parents couldn't afford to take the next step."

She says the Heiken Fund needed to find an organization that had an infrastructure in place.



Virginia Jacko presides over Florida Heiken Children's Vision Program.

them," Ms. Jacko says. "They ferred had already failed a would need glasses. With our rates. infrastructure, we were able to grow it. Nearly 10,000 were have this program, would continue given exams last year, and be- to struggle at school," she says.

were providing about 2,500 screening, 80% required children with comprehensive glasses. Optilab provides the eye exams, and typically, 75% glasses at highly subsidized

"These are kids who, if we didn't



Photo by Sergio Alsina

Steven Marcus and Heiken's Virginia Jacko with the award presented by Manny Rodriguez, right, FPL regional director for external affairs.

ance, the program does not com- find ways to make the Heiken pete with doctors."

Last year, she says, the Heiken cost-effective. Children's Vision Program was funding from the Florida Department of Health and other community foundations.

The innovative program may become a model for other communities. Anarticle about it co-authored don't use them. by Ms. Jacko, Alan P. Levitt, Steven E. Marcus and Alfred A. Rosenbloom and published in "Optometry: The Journal of the American Optometric Association" resulted in inquiries, including one from a husband-and-wife team of later." optometrists who want to replicate the program in the West.

homes without any kind of insur- Foundation of South Florida to Children's Vision Program more

Currently, the program able to expand operations with funds four mobile units bringing optometrists to schools to give eye examinations. The parents of children who need glasses are given vouchers for in-office visits - but many

> "We plan to hire a marketing company," she says, "to find out what the barriers are to using the vouchers, and also to see if the children are still wearing the glasses a year

From this, she expects another publication. "I don't think Next on the agenda, Ms. Jacko nonprofits typically do market says, is a marketing study in research to determine the out-