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TRUTH IN PLACE.

Life-changing vision equipment helps children see more clearly

By Aisling Mäki, Daily Memphian, Published: February 05, 2024

Eight-year-old Marley Brewer smiles while learning to use a vision aid for children with low vision called an electronic video magnifier at Southern College of Optometry Feb. 1, 2024.
(Patrick Lantrip/The Daily Memphian)

Children with severe vision impairment have received high-tech vision aids for free thanks to a local initiative by the Southern College of Optometry and Sight Savers America.

SCO and Sight Savers, a national nonprofit that coordinates free eye care for children, has provided 14 children with electronic video magnifiers.

"There are so many kids that need this help," said Dr. Dawn DeCarlo, Sight Savers CEO. "The program really targets children from homes that have financial need."

Low vision impairment cannot be corrected with eyeglasses, contact lenses or surgical treatment, which makes everyday tasks and school work difficult for children struggling with low vision.

"It's tiring and it requires extra mental effort just to see before you can then spend your mental effort to comprehend and utilize the information you're getting," DeCarlo said.

The equipment will dramatically improve the children's quality of life and independence and empower them to read, write and even see people's faces clearly.

"It's not even all about academics because there's a lot of incidental learning that happens in life," DeCarlo said. "You know — what the wing of a butterfly looks like. They can examine plants and things that we take for granted: that incidental learning."

The donated Onyx Video Magnifier made by Freedom Scientific features a 22-inch, high-resolution computer monitor and a camera that magnifies images and objects up to 118 times.

The model costs about $3,000, and electronic video magnifiers are not covered by medical insurance.

"These video magnifiers make things bigger, and customize in a way that's optimal for that person's vision impairment," DeCarlo said. "It just makes vision so much more comfortable. It's about access — comfortable access."

Nine-year-old Jacob Gibson learns to use a vision aid for children with low vision called an electronic video magnifier at Southern College of Optometry Feb. 1, 2024.
(Patrick Lantrip/The Daily Memphian)

The donated technology was bought with funding from The Assisi Foundation of Memphis, SCO and Vispero, the world's largest assistive technology provider for people with visual impairment.

Some of the children also received portable Ruby handheld video magnifiers to help them view items like price tags, grocery ingredients and menus.

The children received their devices last week, then sat down with optometrists for training on how to use the equipment.

The children will also receive extensive follow-up care at no cost and the college will record their progress with the vision equipment until they reach age 19.

"They need resources at all different junctures," said Dr. Karen Squier, SCO chief of low vision services.

"We make sure they have continued support," she said. "Sometimes it's helping out with a device, sometimes it's helping coordinate services like mobility instruction or different types of education adaptations that come through this school."

The children were identified by low vision doctors from the SCO and the University of Tennessee Health Science Center, as well as by teachers serving visually impaired students in Shelby and Fayette counties.

"Children may not have access to devices like this outside of school," Squier said. "And we know Memphis has a high prevalence of children living in poverty. If we can help that child early, it's going to help with outcomes like psychological and educational development."

Jordyn Cole and her grandmother, Carolyn Robinson learn to use a vision aid for children with low vision called an electronic video magnifier at Southern College of Optometry Feb. 1, 2024. *Patrick Lantrip/The Daily Memphian)*

Sight Savers and SCO have worked together since 2014 to help Memphis area children who need low vision evaluations and high-tech vision aids.

"We serve kids in 16 different states," DeCarlo said. "In some states, we're also able to serve adults. And we do this by partnering with local organizations like Southern College of Optometry to help us identify the patients, and by partnering with local foundations."

Since the start of the partnership, more than 70 local children have received low vision assistance devices at no cost to their families.

Kenshundra Wadji of Memphis was referred to the Sight Savers program after Hamilton Eye Institute diagnosed her son, Elijah, 9, with cortical visual impairment, the leading cause of childhood low vision.

"The device is awesome," she said. "He's really happy he'll be able to see his tablet and his books and everything. I've had a lot of follow up calls after his appointment. They're constantly in contact with us about everything, and any need I call them about, they're always there to help us."

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