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## Naples Lions Club project against 'lazy eye' in children hits high marks

**Liz Freeman**, Naples Daily News      Published 8:00 a.m. ET Sept. 30, 2019

Seven-year-old Luis Garcell says he loves reading and math.

Seconds later, after gazing upward and thinking it over, the first-grader at Corkscrew Elementary switches the order: He loves math first then reading.

Fortunately, a check up with his pediatrician two years ago detected his “lazy eye” early enough for treatment. Without intervention, the first-grader with big brown eyes and sweet demeanor could have faced permanent vision loss.

The Naples Lions Club embarked on a campaign in early 2017 to detect and eliminate amblyopia, or lazy eye, among Collier County children by placing a special camera, called a SPOT vision screener, in pediatric practices at no cost to the practices.

The youngster's parents, Lenia and Luis Garcell, are indebted to the Naples Lions Club for its long-held mission to help children - and adults - with a variety of programs to help preserve their vision and quality of life.

“The camera in the pediatrician’s office is a godsend,” Luis Garcell, the boy’s father, said. “We are so grateful.”



Luis Garcell, 7, who was diagnosed with “lazy eye” at age 5, builds a drone at home on Wednesday, September 26, 2019, in North Naples. His pediatrician has a camera in his practice that was provided at no charge from the Naples Lions Club, which launched a program in early 2017 to detect and treat lazy eye in Collier County preschool children. (Photo: Wangyuxuan Xu/Naples Daily News USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

The lazy eye condition is caused by a breakdown in how one eye and the brain interact. Eventually the weaker eye receives fewer brain signals and vision worsens in the weaker eye, according to the National Eye Institute.

To date, 22 of the 25 pediatric practices in Collier have the cameras and more than 45,000 children have been screened. More than 5,000 preschool children have been referred for complete eye exams.

"We are thrilled that this innovative program has reached this benchmark of success," said Dr. Howard Freedman, treasurer of the Naples Lions Club.

In addition, the Naples Lions Club does vision screening of more than 2,000 preschool children at the roughly 50 child care centers throughout Collier.

Amblyopia is the leading cause of preventable vision loss in children and requires early detection, by approximately age 6, for treatment to be successful, Freedman said.

He practiced pediatric ophthalmology in Redmond, Washington, and taught at the University of Washington in Seattle before retiring and relocating to Naples.

Freedman invented the first photoscreening camera to test children for lazy eye and held a patent on it until the late 1990s.

He published an article in May with research colleagues in the Journal of Pediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus about results of the philanthropic-based project in Collier.

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Placing the cameras that cost \$7,000 each in pediatric practices was possible by support from private individuals and a half dozen charitable grants, including ones from the Naples Children & Education Foundation, or NCEF, the Community Foundation of Collier County, The League Club and others.

"This project has proven the hypothesis that using a model of philanthropy to place instrument-based vision screeners in pediatric medical homes results in increased screening and referrals of at-risk preschool children," the journal article states.

NCEF in 2018 provided a grant of more than \$14,000 to pay for two cameras in pediatric practices after learning how many children had gotten too old for effective treatment for lazy eye, said Maria Jimenez-Lara, chief executive officer of NCEF.

It became clear educating parents and ensuring children get screened had to be done during well child visits at pediatricians' offices, she said.



From left to right, Luis Garcell, 7, makes joke with her mom Lenia Garcell and dad Luis Garcell on Wednesday, September 26, 2019, in North Naples. Luis was diagnosed with "lazy eye" at age 5, which is medically known as amblyopia. His pediatrician has a camera in his practice that was provided at no charge from the Naples Lions Club, which launched a program in early 2017 to detect and treat lazy eye in Collier County preschool children. (Photo: Wangyuxuan Xu/Naples Daily News USA TODAY NETWORK - FLORIDA)

"The impact has been incredible on many fronts," Jimenez-Lara said. "Now there are 22 out of 25 pediatricians screening for vision-related issues and helping children receive treatment and services in time to make a life-changing impact."

NCEF has its own children's vision initiative that is multi-faceted with a mobile van, vision screening for older children, and it provides glasses, one pair each for home and school.

In the journal article, Freedman said he does not believe any other community has attempted 100% coverage of preschool screenings in pediatric medical homes.

"We obtained 90% coverage by the end of 2018," the article said.

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## How it works

When Lenia Garcell took her son in 2017 to Dr. Romilio Marques in Naples for a regular visit, the pediatrician explained what the camera does and how the boy, then 5, needed to be tested.

Something wasn't right with his right eye. The pediatrician said the boy needed to be seen by an ophthalmologist for lazy eye.

"We had never heard of it," Lenia Garcell said. She trusted her pediatrician without question and immediately made the appointment for an eye exam.

The ophthalmologist put him on a therapy program to correct the lazy eye. He also would need glasses afterward.

"We had to train the eyes to work together," Luis Garcell, the father, said. "So we would cover one eye and do exercises and cover the other eye and do exercises. We did that for a year and a half."

Dr. Hector Cordero, another pediatrician in Naples, said having the camera has made a big difference in detecting vision issues, not just lazy eye.

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Cordero's medical assistant, Nicole Sanchez, uses the camera in the practice.

The pupils need to be dilated, so she has each child sit in a dark room for a few minutes. The camera takes a picture and within minutes, she can print out the complete results.

"This is like gold," Cordero said. "It's been good. The fact that it can catch the patient before school age is huge. By the age of 7, it is too late."