



The Chicago
Lighthouse

the Beam

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50 YEARS of Early Intervention



Dear Friends,

From the President and Chief Executive Officer
—Janet P. Szlyk, Ph.D.

Recently, The Chicago Lighthouse received a call from Gary, the parent of a child who had been enrolled in our Birth-to-Three Program nearly 30 years ago. Gary had just become a new grandparent, and his granddaughter had just been diagnosed with the same condition as his daughter a generation ago. The diagnosis brought back a flood of memories, including how important our Birth-to-Three

Program was in helping his daughter—and his entire family—adapt to this unexpected challenge. Gary was calling to see if the Birth-to-Three Program was still available to provide the same assistance to his granddaughter and her family.

It is, and Gary's granddaughter is now a thriving preschooler. Her vision has stabilized, she communicates clearly and she navigates independently. She is eager to learn and enjoys playing with her new friends on the playground. While she still encounters challenges as a child with a visual impairment living in a world built for the sighted, she has the skills to overcome those challenges as she advances through school and in life.

The Chicago Lighthouse's Birth-to-Three Early Intervention Program will celebrate its 50th anniversary next year. Over that time, we have taught thousands of infants and toddlers with visual disabilities how to use senses, such as hearing and touch, to comprehend the world around them. At the same time, we have also helped their families understand how to best support their children throughout their lives, so that they can become independent, confident adults.

We see the effects of this program every day, as several program graduates (including Chicago Lighthouse Media Associate Producer Sandy Murillo, who contributed a "Sandy's View" perspective for this Beam) are currently employed at The Chicago Lighthouse. Their presence is a constant reminder of the potential of everyone we serve.

I hope you enjoy this issue of The Beam, which recounts some of the history of our Birth-to-Three Program, highlights a few of our success stories from it, and profiles one of the program's longtime supporters. Thank you all for your support of this—and all of—our critical programs.

ON THE COVER: Bryant is a recent graduate of The Chicago Lighthouse's Birth-to-Three Program. The program uses play-based learning to help children with vision impairments reach critical developmental milestones.



The Chicago
Lighthouse

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UPCOMING EVENTS

chicagolighthouse.org/events

FLAIR! Fashion Show & Luncheon

September 22, 2023

Ritz Carlton, Chicago

Rise to Shine 10K/5k/1M Inclusive Run & Walk

October 22, 2023

Illinois Medical District

37th Annual House & Garden Walk

November 3-5, 2023

Virtual



Make your gift
TODAY!



A Half Century of Helping Infants & Toddlers

Imagine yourself in 1974, and your newborn has just been diagnosed with a visual disability. There's no internet. No social media. The best place to access information is the local library—and **The Chicago Lighthouse.**

Long before there were any state-coordinated and mandated early intervention services for young children with disabilities, The Chicago Lighthouse launched its own program to help children with visual impairments learn how to use senses like hearing, touch and smell to understand the world around them and be included with their peers in school and in social activities.

Since that time, The Lighthouse's Birth-to-Three Program has helped thousands of children flourish on their own terms in a world built for the sighted.

"Vision plays such a significant role in development. However, there are so many ways of learning. We have [other] senses, and we make sure that all of these strengths and abilities are utilized," says Senior Director of Birth-to-Three and Children's Programs Marla Garstka.

"Research shows us that the first three years of development are the most significant years. We have the most opportunity to build skills, because the brains of infants and toddlers are so adaptable at that time."

It's not just the kids who benefit from the program either. For many parents, their child's diagnosis is their first introduction into the world of disability. For them, the Birth-to-Three services are

an opportunity to address and understand that their children's journey may be different than expected, but it is not without hope.

"From the very beginning, Marla reassured me that Sandy was a quick learner," says Margarita, whose daughter was in our program 30 years ago. "That gave me a lot of relief and hope for Sandy's future. Had we not had the support from Marla and

the Birth-to-Three Program, we simply would've been extremely overwhelmed and not known where to turn for help."

"I could talk at great length about the invaluable knowledge, resources and support that I gained from the Birth-to-Three Program," says Michael, a program graduate now working at The Lighthouse. **"Most important of all, the Birth-to-Three program gave my parents hope for my future."**

Indeed, while all of The Lighthouse's programs are vital, the Birth-to-Three Program may be the most critical because it helps young children—and their families—develop the skills that become the foundation for a lifetime of success.

"Our program is the beginning of a child's and family's success and life. I really believe this is the key to their success," Marla says.

“
When I run into families after graduation and hear all their accomplishments, my heart is so full of joy.

— Marla Garstka

BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUCCESS

Supporting young children early helps them become confident adolescents and independent adults.

Emilia



Emilia was only six days old when testing revealed the young girl had been born without optic nerves and has microphthalmia. For her first-time parents, the diagnosis—as well as subsequent tests to rule out other diseases—led to an overwhelming sense of fear and worry.

“It was really hard because we don’t know any blind people,” says Emilia’s mom, Claudia. ***“We didn’t have any experience with blindness. We didn’t know what to do. The first thing the pediatrician told us was to contact The Chicago Lighthouse.”***

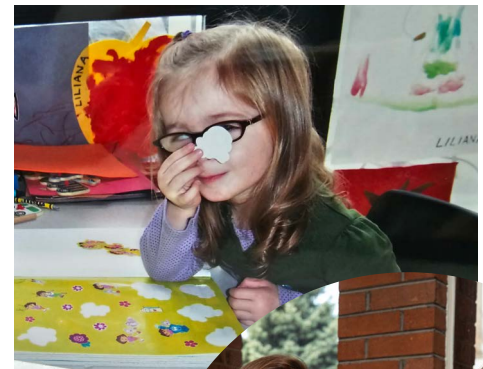
Once enrolled in the program, Emilia began learning how to use hearing and touch as her primary gateways to understanding her world, opening opportunities for Claudia and Emilia’s father, Juan Carlos, to experience the world in new ways. The family has begun to make connections within the broader Lighthouse community.

Liliana

When Liliana was an infant in The Chicago Lighthouse’s Birth-to-Three Program, her teacher cautioned the young girl’s parents about creating arbitrary limits on what she could do. Diagnosed with Peter’s Anomaly, a rare disorder that causes clouding of the cornea, “Grandma Susie,” Liliana’s teacher, explained that instilling self-confidence at a young age would pay off later in life.

Now a rising senior at Walter Payton College Prep, the confidence Liliana’s family nurtured at a young age is blossoming. Liliana is a passionate advocate for herself and for her peers. Last year, Liliana used one of the school’s professional development days to educate the teachers about the best ways to work with students who have visual disabilities. She credits her current confidence to the foundational skills she learned as a child.

“Having physical therapy, occupational therapy, orientation and mobility training, and low vision instruction at such a young age helped me develop the skills that I have now,” says Liliana, who is hoping to put her advocacy skills to use as a disability rights attorney as an adult.



Birth-to-Three Program Director
Marla Garstka & Liliana



Alan, pictured
with his mother,
Betsy, and
Aunt Sally



Alan

“I was a bit young, so I don’t exactly remember every single activity we did, but I studied child development in college,” says Alan, a 26-year-old former participant in The Lighthouse’s Birth-to-Three Program. ***“Those years are so incredibly important to a person’s success.”***

A graduate of Beloit College, Alan credits the Birth-to-Three Program with providing him with the confidence to never let vision loss stop him from pursuing his dreams, including swimming competitively in high school and college. Upon graduation, Alan worked for Accenture and has recently begun working for housing developer Brinshore, which, not coincidentally, is The Lighthouse’s partner on the currently under-construction Foglia Residences.

Still, Alan’s dreams remain undiminished. He has said he would one day like to swim across the English Channel. ***“I’m not sure if anyone has done it without sight,”*** he says. ***“I believe people can do anything, just not necessarily all in the same way.”***



Lace up your shoes and register to be part of our 2nd annual Rise to Shine Inclusive Run & Walk on Sunday, October 22, 2023! Register as an individual or form a team with friends and family at: www.RiseToShineRace.com.



OUTSIDE THE COMFORT ZONE

As someone who is blind, it’s not always easy for me to try new physical activities. A lack of encouragement from others, not knowing what is available in the community, and even my own mindset can stop me from trying new things. Still, I learned long ago that nothing gets accomplished by staying in your comfort zone.

Friends—both blind and sighted —had long suggested I try Pilates. But I wasn’t sure. I didn’t even know where to find a class, much less an instructor that could accommodate my need for one-one, hands-on instruction.

Fortunately, I found Movement Med, a studio focusing on Pilates and personal training for people with different disabilities and health conditions. In spring 2022, I joined a friend – who is also vision impaired – in the studio. Erica, our instructor, is simply outstanding in giving us both hands-on and verbal instruction on proper position and movement.

I’m glad I stepped out of my comfort zone. I feel more fit. My mental health and energy has greatly improved. I have also seen dramatic improvement in my spatial awareness and balance, something that is essential for people with vision loss.



Sandy Murillo is an Associate Producer at Chicago Lighthouse Media and a graduate of our Birth-to-Three Program. “Sandy’s View” will be a reoccurring feature in our future Beam newsletters.



DONOR FOCUS: SPECIAL KIDS FOUNDATION

Though The Chicago Lighthouse’s Birth-to-Three Program is fortunate to receive some funding through the state’s Early Intervention Program, that contribution only covers about one-quarter of our program’s overall expenses. We rely on private donors and foundations to cover the rest of the program (to whom we are forever grateful).

Special Kids Foundation is one of those organizations. Since 2011, Special Kids Foundation has provided more than \$250,000 to our Birth-to-Three Program as part of its mission to assist children with developmental delays. (Roughly 85% of the children enrolled in our Birth-to-Three Program have additional, non-visual disabilities, including developmental delays.)

One of the aspects of The Lighthouse’s program that appeals to Special Kids Foundation is its family support. Elements such as our parent support group, music and play groups and gatherings like the beeping Easter egg hunt are essential, and are not part of many other Early Intervention programs.

“By kids interacting with other kids and parents interacting with other parents, the program provides an additional level of support that is essential as kids get older,” says Cheryle Yallen, SPK’s Executive Director.

CHILDREN’S BLINDNESS STATISTICS



69,000 U.S. Children under 5 have a visual disability.
(American Community Survey, 2021)

+26% Increase in number of preschool children with visual impairments by 2060
with 69% of visual impairment resulting from simple uncorrected refractive error. (JAMA Ophthalmology, June 2017)

115 Children enrolled in The Chicago Lighthouse’s Birth-to-Three Program in 2022.

85% of Children in The Chicago Lighthouse’s Birth-to-Three Program have multiple disabilities.



1,220 Illinois Children under 5 with a visual disability.
(American Community Survey, 2021)

10.5% Prevalence of Cortical Visual Impairment (CVI) among children with developmental disabilities.
(Oman Journal of Ophthalmology, 2011)

“ Children with low vision have a reportedly higher incidence of mental health concerns compared to their sighted peers. ”
(American Academy of Ophthalmology, January 2023)

PLEASE CONSIDER A PLANNED GIFT! Many of our most loyal contributors choose to fund our mission by including The Chicago Lighthouse in their estate plans. Planned gifts offer you the flexibility to maintain your current financial security while also providing long-term support for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, disabled and Veterans. To learn more about estate gift opportunities at The Chicago Lighthouse, **contact Lora Nickels at lora.nickels@chicagolighthouse.org or (312) 997-3643.**