



Foundation treats pupils to gift of sight

Chicago boy is 5 millionth patient helped by group offering free vision testing, glasses

By Tony C. Yang
Tribune staff reporter

Lavonte Phillips, 11, couldn't see what his teachers were writing at the front of the classroom.

"It was hard to see the board," he said. "It wasn't clear."

The lanky 6th grader will see things differently now that he has received a free new pair of sleek oval eyeglasses.

On Thursday, Phillips, a student at Henson Elementary School, became the 5 millionth person worldwide to be treated by the Give the Gift of Sight Foundation, said executive director Joe Dezenzo.

The foundation offers free eye exams and eyeglasses to needy people. Its motto is, "If you can't see, you can't learn."

For students who are nearsighted, farsighted or colorblind, excelling in school can be difficult when homework directions have to be deciphered and textbooks must be closely read.

For the next couple of weeks, as many as 5,000 Chicago Public Schools students are participating in a clinic run by the foundation. This is the second year for the clinic, which is being held at Jefferson Elementary.

Students are eligible for the free eye exams if they fail two mandatory vision screenings or if a teacher refers them, said Ken Papineau, director of coordinated school health for Chicago schools. The benefit of working with outside organizations such as Give the Gift of Sight is that they can provide what the school district cannot, he said.

The district and Chicago Communities in Schools worked together to choose about 50 students each from 100 schools to participate in the vision clinic, said Becca Kopf, Communities in

Schools' director of development.

"We'll see 400 to 500 students in a typical day," she said.

The effort depends on a small staff and volunteers from local eyewear retailers and optometrists' offices.

"A lot of people can't afford an eye exam and glasses," said Dr. Ben Nelson, a Rockford optometrist who worked at the clinic. "This is an important need." He's been with the foundation for two years and has examined patients' eyes from Mexico to China.

The elementary students were taken through a series of eye exams, from a visual acuity test to sitting in front of a phoropter, an instrument that helps determine the proper prescription.

At one station, a tonometer puffed air into Phillips' pupils to measure eye pressure. "It makes my eyes water," he said after the test.

Like Phillips, Vanessa Reyna also had trouble in school because of poor vision.

Her mother, Gabriela, said she used to be an honors student until her vision grew worse. Teachers warned her that she might fail 4th grade.

The 4th grader at Washington Elementary School said she's back on track, thanks to glasses she received from the foundation last year. "I'm third in the class now," declared Reyna, who was getting tested again Thursday.

Despite all the fanfare surrounding his special status as the 5 millionth patient, Phillips remained concerned about looking good. As he tried on eyeglass frames, he deliberated carefully.

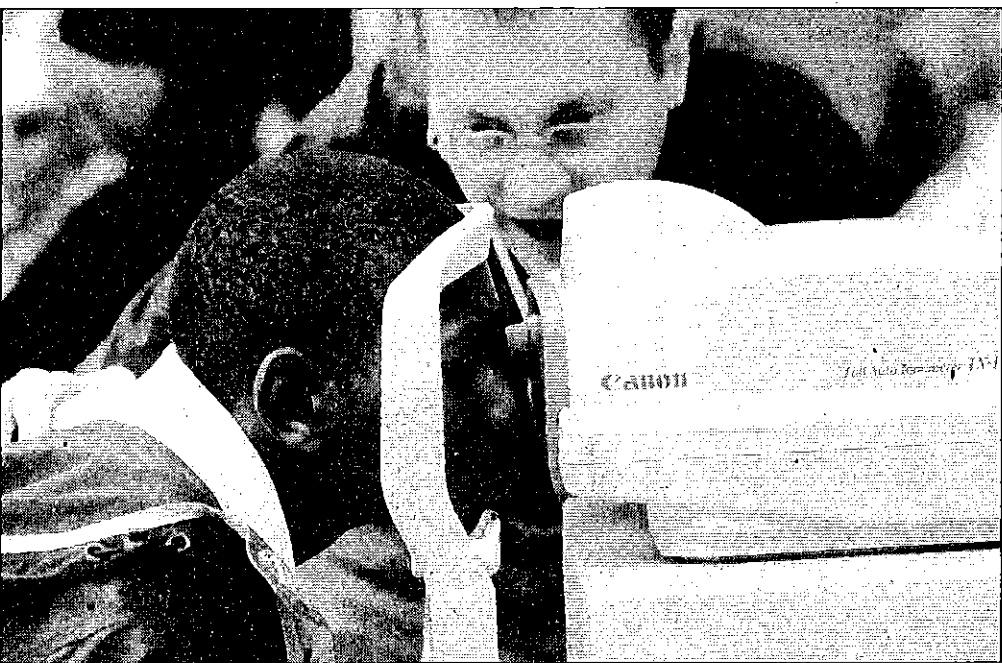
Rectangle? No.

Wire frame? Nah.

Out of a tray of Nautica and Kenneth Cole eyeglass frames, Phillips selected a dark bronze one. He gazed into a mirror.

"I look great," he said.

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Tribune photos by David Klobucar

Henson School 6th grader Lavonte Phillips, 11, goes through an eye exam and vision testing before selecting a new pair of eyeglasses Thursday as part of the Give the Gift of Sight Foundation program. Phillips is the 5 millionth patient to be treated by the foundation.