

Willie Fay Lewis opened the Lighthouse for the Blind of Fort Worth in 1935, when she was tasked by the Texas Commission for the Blind with “finding a handful of blind people and see what she could do to help them.” Blind herself, she set about teaching some basic life skills and put people to work making brooms and caning chairs. While the Lighthouse of Fort Worth continues that mission today as Tarrant County’s largest employer of people who are blind, brooms and chairs are a thing of the past. Instead, the organization’s blind workforce makes military-grade corrugated boxes, spiral-wound shipping tubes, drug testing kits, and myriad other products. But in 2017, the Lighthouse did something surprising and unexpected: open an optical lab, creating high-quality prescription lenses with the goal of being the manufacturing lab for opticians in Fort Worth and surrounding areas. Now, in an ironic twist, the blind are making eyeglasses for the sighted.

It was shortly after this new venture began that Head of Development, Lisa Fellers, had a late night, divinely-inspired idea. “What if,” she thought, “we could get funders to pay for eyeglasses for kids or others in need, and those glasses are in turn made by the Lighthouse?” Not only would this support the Lighthouse’s blind workforce, funders’ efforts could have double the impact through the Lighthouse’s outreach into the community. Winners all around! She made a call to Dr. Jennifer Deakins, who runs the Community Eye Clinic and was the Lighthouse’s Board Chair at the time, and ran the idea past her. Dr. Deakins was immediately hooked, and thus, Mission Optical was born.

Funders liked the idea, too! A “toolbox grant” from the North Texas Community Foundation allowed for program development, a website, and other organizational materials. Soon, other funders jumped into the effort, such as the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, Alcon, and several Lion’s Club chapters in District 2E2. In the beginning, Mission Optical only partnered with the Community Eye Clinic and the Alexander Vision Center; those centers provided the eye exams, while Mission Optical provided the eyeglasses. But it soon became apparent that the program had the potential for a much broader reach, so an effort was made to expand to include underserved kids at local schools, as well as other nonprofits, like the AIDS Outreach Center and Victory Temple in Fort Worth.

Eventually, those in need and the service organizations that help them will be able to do a search through the website where they can find a participating optometrist in their area who will provide a discounted \$40 eye exam and fitting of new eyeglasses, supplied at no cost to the patient by Mission Optical. Several local organizations already provide vision screenings, exams, and eyeglasses to needy children and adults, but demand has far exceeded resources. The Lighthouse is filling the gap through Mission Optical.

“The goal is to get as many optometrists to participate in the program as possible in order to expand the program’s reach to as many people in need as we can,” says Michael Light, the Lighthouse’s Optical Lab Service representative who joined the team with 27 years of experience in the optical field. “The vision of Mission Optical is providing no-cost eyeglasses for people in need. The mission of Lighthouse for the Blind is to empower blind individuals through superior

training and meaningful employment. It's the convergence of these two objectives that makes the Mission Optical program so special to me."

As the program has expanded and increased the opportunity for folks to participate, the community response has been overwhelmingly positive that the Lighthouse of Fort Worth is able to increase its outreach through Mission Optical. As Light puts it, "Every pair of glasses supplied by Mission Optical is actually doing double duty. Helping people get the vision correction they need *and* creating meaningful jobs and funding for the blind community. I think it's the union of the two that makes Mission Optical so unique and extraordinary."

"The more offices we can get into, the better!"