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## A Holistic Focus

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A MIAMI BEACH OPTOMETRIST'S APPROACH TO HEALING INVOLVES TREATING THE PATIENT'S BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT. IT ALSO INVOLVES TAKING HIS SERVICES TO THOSE IN NEED, BOTH LOCALLY AND ABROAD.

When patients visit Michael Siebert's Miami Beach office of optometry, they might not leave with a new pair of glasses or contact lenses. Instead, Siebert might prescribe a new diet, a detoxification regimen or an eye-therapy course.

Siebert, 36, practices holistic eye care out of his office at 1354 Washington Ave. "Diet, spirituality, emotional state and physical health" all play a role in eye wellness, Siebert said. "Any one of these out of whack can affect your vision."

While training at the New England College of Optometry in Boston, Siebert said he came across an example that supported this concept and pointed him in the direction of holistic healing.

A patient who had 20/20 vision complained that she could not see, he said. The patient's husband had died recently. Her emotional state manifested physically as a constricted visual field, he said, which meant she had severe tunnel vision with limited peripheral vision.

Using a holistic approach, doctors helped the woman address the loss of her husband, which Siebert said enabled her to gain back her peripheral vision. Traditional optometry would have only assessed her vision acuity, he said.

Holistic eye care, Siebert said, is rare and can be found in few places throughout South Florida. Such services can range from \$95-\$180 at Siebert's office.

Siebert said he became interested in optometry while studying biology and business at Drake University in Des Moines. The Topeka, Kan., native had a job at an optometrist's office, but after graduating in 1991, he took off for New York City and tried investment banking for no other reason than to try it, he said.

"I just fell into it, and I was miserable at that," Siebert said about his interim career. "I hated my job. I knew I needed to quit. I was very aware of how the body communicates to you. Within a matter of time, my face became paralyzed."

Siebert determined that the paralysis was a physical manifestation of the displeasure and misery that he felt in his life because of his career choice. The paralysis did not change until he changed the things that were making him ill, he said.

"As soon as I began to take action, the paralysis went away," said Siebert, who did his clinical training program at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute after completing his studies at the New England College of Optometry in 1998.

In order to share his findings and help others, Siebert participates locally in the Heiken Children's Vision Fund, which provides free vision services to needy Miami-Dade School District children and their

families. During the past three years, Siebert has provided vision services at various schools on the organization's fully equipped, customized minivan or vision bus. He also has provided in-office services by way of referral to Miami-Dade students.

Evonne Jackson, 11, who attends Charles Drew Elementary, participated in the program last year. Siebert recommended eye therapy for Evonne's condition, said Helen Jackson, Evonne's mother.

"It's been very interesting," Jackson said of her daughter, who could not see unless she was wearing her glasses. "Now she sits far away from the board without glasses and can see."

Siebert, who is single and lives in South Beach, said his mother died when he was 13. Unable to live with his father, Siebert ended up living with a family that took him in. The generosity made an impression, said Siebert, who plans to continue his community service locally but also abroad.

"When someone helps you, it's important to return the favor," Siebert said.

While Siebert has his holistic optometry practice, he still puts in one day a week at a Lens Crafters office in Aventura, which allows him to pursue his desire to help others in developing countries.

Luxxotica Retail, which owns Lens Crafters and other eye care retail outlets, sponsors the Give the Gift of Sight Foundation, through which retail associates, affiliated doctors, the Lions Club International, local charities and volunteers provide vision care around the world.

Since 2002, Siebert has made four international community service trips to Bolivia, Mexico, Ecuador and Honduras. His most recent trip was to Cambodia, where he was part of a 33-member team in June. With the help of the Lions Club, the group saw 28,000 people and distributed 40,000 pairs of glasses to those in need in eight days.

Because of Cambodia's war-plagued history, Cambodians who received care often had trauma from bombs, mines and bullet wounds to the face. These conditions affect vision, said Alan Hymowitz, an optometrist at an Atlanta Lens Crafters who accompanied Siebert on the mission to Cambodia.

"A lot of people had just one eye," Hymowitz said.

However, despite of the lack of modern conveniences and physical trauma many of the Cambodians had experienced, Siebert said he was taken aback by the lack of eye disease in the country.

"There was no diabetic retinopathy, no glaucoma and no macular generation; these are the three leading causes of blindness in the United States," Siebert said, attributing the Cambodian diet of fish and rice to their eye wellness.