

Let *California Optometry* know about your experiences in the community – where you presented, what topics you discussed, what materials were effective, and any other suggestions to inspire others to increase optometry’s visibility in the community.

Please send submissions for “Public Awareness in Your Community” to Corrie Pelc, managing editor of *California Optometry*, via e-mail at cpelc@coavision.org or by fax at 916-448-1423.



(From left) Dr. Tommy Lim, Rob Bell, Karen Flynn, Dr. John Spallone and Dr. Joy Sarver. (Photo by Eric Frazier)

PUBLIC AWARENESS IN YOUR COMMUNITY EVERYONE DESERVES TO SEE. . . YOU CAN MAKE IT HAPPEN!

By Dr. Tommy L. Lim of the Santa Clara County Optometric Society

What started out as a simple favor to a colleague has now changed the way I look at a growing segment of our population — the homeless. Even though I have helped prepare and serve meals for the homeless in the past, there was no actual interaction or dialogue with any of the individuals. However, other than those few feel good experiences, my perspective in dealing with the homeless has been one of uneasiness. How would I avoid making eye contact or keep my distance from a homeless individual asking for help?

In April 2009, EyeCoach president Rob Bell asked if I would be interested in volunteering a day doing eye exams in San Francisco with a group called Project Homeless Connect. Rob had read about the project in February in the *San Francisco Chronicle* and decided he wanted to help out with eye care at the next scheduled event on June 5th. This portion of the project was the dream of Karen Flynn, a caring and committed leader, who is an optician from San Francisco. Just imagine storing boxes and boxes of frames in your apartment, along with two phoropters and two portable tripod-like stands.

The day started off like any typical hustle and bustle Friday morning you would expect in San Francisco. However, this was



Dr. Tommy Lim examines a patient. (Photo by Eric Frazier)

not your typical financial district crowd. As soon as I arrived to set up, there was the beginning of a long orderly line of people outside the Bill Graham Civic Auditorium. The clients were composed of all ethnicities, primarily male around age 45. It is estimated that 30% of the homeless are military veterans. Beyond eye care, some of the other services provided were dental and medical screenings, hair cuts, HIV testing, needle exchange, substance abuse

counseling and wheelchair repairs. However, eye care and eyeglasses were the most sought after service. Our team was composed of Karen, Rob and Dr. Joy Sarver, Dr. John Spallone of the San Francisco Optometric Society and myself. That day, 2,053 people were seen, linking individuals to badly needed services. We performed 65 eye exams, with 39 patients getting prescription glasses and over 400 pairs of readers dispensed. The patients were examined while sitting on a makeshift exam chair, a metal folding chair, with the phoropter positioned in front of their face. I will never forget the thoughts I had while doing the refraction. These patients were concentrating on whether lens #1 or lens #2 was clearer. My method of testing and the decision making process for these patients was the same as in my practice. The *only* difference was the challenging circumstances surrounding the lives of these homeless patients. The one thing I will remember most was the look on the patients’ faces when I offered my hand to introduce myself to them. Dr. Spallone, a Project Homeless Connect veteran, told me that morning that something as simple as a handshake was confirmation to these patients that they were respected as human beings. I couldn’t agree more.

This was a humbling experience. My thoughts on the drive to San Francisco that day were to help the homeless. At the end of the day, the person that benefited the most was not the homeless, but me. I may not be able to change their situation, but at least I can make their life a little better.

The next big Project Homeless Connect is scheduled to take place Wednesday, October 28th. If you are interested in helping or would like to make a financial donation, please contact me at drlim@berryessaoptometry.com.

I would like to especially acknowledge Barney Dougher of Hoya Vision Care for generously donating the prescription lenses for us. Thank you for having a heart and making a difference in people’s lives.