

Giving the gift of sight at East High

Program outfits 1,200 students with free eyeglasses



Fourth-grader Marquise Brooks, 9, from School 8 gets his eyes checked by East High School senior Kevin Lin, who has been with the optometry program for two years. CARLOS ORTIZ@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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If the mark of a great teacher is helping students see their world more clearly, one of the best in the business may be at East High School in Rochester.

His name is Logan Newman and he's outfitted roughly 1,200 Rochester City School District students with eyeglasses for free through the vision care program he launched in 2010.

From a laboratory classroom at East, students barely old enough to drive are practicing opticians churning out eyewear for their peers on a daily basis under Newman's tutelage.

Watching them work, it's difficult to discern who gets more out of the experience. The eyewear recipients who see in focus for the first time in years, perhaps ever. Or the student opticians who had a hand in giving them the gift of sight.

"Honestly, watching someone try on their glasses for the first time is the best feeling," Newman said. "They look around the room and say, 'I can read that! I can see that!' It brings tears to your eyes. It really does."

There was a time not long ago that career and technical education in high



Volunteer Jennifer Bateman of Brighton checks the sight of Thekrayat Alammari, 5, an emigrant from Yemen, at East High School. CARLOS ORTIZ@CFORTIZ_DANDC/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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LOGAN NEWMAN, TEACHER WHO STARTED THE PROGRAM THROUGH A STATE GRANT

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Thekayat Alammary, 5, of Rochester, who attends kindergarten at School 34, tries new eyeglasses at East High School.

Eyewear

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school was limited to wood shop and automotive training, with the classrooms equipped with a hand-me-down lathe and a beat-up Ford Escort.

In the vision care lab at East, students use sophisticated machinery worth tens of thousands of dollars to record the distance between pupils. They use auto refractors to measure how light reflects through the eyeball.

They're tasked with choosing the correct corresponding lens from hundreds in a filing cabinet, then cutting the glass and sanding down its sharp edges to fit the shape of the eyeglasses' frame.

"It's a good feeling," said Kendrick Martin, a 17-year-old junior. "It makes me feel like a professional."

Newman, 43, founded the program during the 2010-11 academic year through a state grant.

He had been an optician in the Navy as a young man, making eyeglasses out of a clinic in Virginia. Upon his discharge, he went to college and earned a biology degree, and soon after began teaching classes on the subject.

During the first year of the program, Newman

taught eight students and a colleague, optics teacher Paul Conrow, whom Newman credits with first suggesting applying for the grant and helping him develop a curriculum.

That year, they made 150 eyeglasses for students who had prescriptions but, for one reason or another, didn't have glasses.

The program proved so popular that the following year the class size doubled, as did the output of eyewear, and Newman obtained his state optician license.

Over the years, the program invested in more machinery and recruited eye doctors to volunteer their time in the lab to test eyesight and write prescriptions, relieving students from having to seek out a doctor on their own. Today, the program sets up mobile clinics that travel to district schools, and it's on track to make 500 pairs of glasses this year.

In a recent week, the program made glasses for 19 students at School 34 and Edison Career and Technology High School and delivered 13 pairs of glasses to the Montessori Academy and School 16. In between, Newman visited several schools to repair glasses.

"Many of the kids receive their first pair of glasses through this pro-

gram," Conrow said. "Honestly, this program should be duplicated in every urban center in America."

The American Optometric Association figures one in four school-age children have undiagnosed vision problems that inhibit their ability to learn. The estimates are higher for school districts with high concentrations of poverty, like Rochester.

On a recent day, three students from School 8 and nine from University Preparatory Charter School for Young Men visited the lab at East to have their eyes checked by a doctor and to be measured for glasses.

When one of them, a 15-year-old boy, looked into the auto refractor machine, a student optician immediately recognized something was wrong. The pupil in the boy's right eye wasn't round. It was misshapen to look like a tadpole, with a deep fissure as the tail.

The boy explained that he had accidentally stabbed himself in the eye with a knife when he was 10. He recalled that his sister had startled him as he was making a sandwich.

Another student, 9-year-old Marquise Brooks, was there for a pair of replacement

glasses. The cost would be \$5. The program charges students to replace glasses in an effort to impart to them a sense of responsibility and ownership.

He chose a pair of black and green frames that matched his sweater. He explained his choice this way: "My mom will be proud because people will look at me like I'm amazing."

Kevin Lin, 17, a senior at East and a second-year student in the program, has seen that exuberance before.

"What I enjoy is seeing how little it takes to make someone's day," Lin said. "When a student puts on their glasses, you can see the enjoyment in their faces."

A common saying among people who get eyeglasses for the first time is that they can "see the leaves." Trees are no longer green blobs to them, but made up of individual leaves with defined veins and blades.

Thekayat Alammary, 5, an emigrant from Yemen who attends kindergarten at School 34, wore an expression of utter wonder when she put on her glasses in the lab.

She spoke no English, but her face said she could see the leaves.

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