

# FOCUS FIRST

UA students play a key role in making Alabama the top state in the nation for detecting and addressing vision problems in young children.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER

Getting glasses in the third grade was a turning point in Jordan Calloway's life. "Going from not seeing to being able to see was huge," says Calloway, a University of Alabama freshman from Covington, Ga., majoring in advertising. "It was like the world just opened up for me. Flowers were flowers instead of smudges." He also started doing better in school.

Calloway was able to share similar benefits with children in Alabama through FocusFirst, an initiative in which college students and recent graduates provide free, high-tech vision screenings to children ages 6 months to 5 years, detecting vision problems in approximately 11 percent of those screened.

"I would notice some kids squinting at things, and when I screened them, they usually showed up with eye problems," says Calloway, who spent 5 to 10 hours per week conducting FocusFirst screenings in West Alabama in Fall 2016. "I am glad I was able to help bring the same feeling I had to those kids."

Vision problems in young children are more common than most people realize. Each year, poor eyesight ad-

versely affects millions of children under age 6 across the United States, due largely to lack of public awareness about the importance of eye care in young children and the inability of children to recognize their own vision impairment. These problems are heightened in families suffering from financial hardship and lack of access to medical care. While vision screenings



Normal Eyes



Amblyopia



Opacities (cataracts)

High-tech photos reveal vision impairments that usually go unnoticed in young children.

are most effective during the preschool years, when early treatment of many conditions can prevent irreversible vision damage or loss, only 21 percent of preschool children nationwide receive comprehensive vision screenings.

In Alabama, college students conduct vision screenings for children in pre-kindergarten programs and daycares as part of a state-wide, campus-based effort led by The University of Alabama and Impact America, a nonprofit housed at the University. FocusFirst partner Sight Savers America, a nonprofit dedicated to improving eye care among children, provides free follow-up care to those with potential vision problems.

Many college-student volunteers receive academic credit for their work with FocusFirst through service-learning courses. "There are two sides to FocusFirst," says Stephen Black, director of the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility and founder of FocusFirst. "We wanted to figure out a way to make a positive impact on the community and also get college students involved. Many students take for granted the ability to see a doctor regularly."

**Thanks to FocusFirst, Alabama leads the nation in diagnosing**



UA students screen children for vision problems by taking photos of their eyes with photo-optic cameras.

**and correcting vision problems in young children.**

**Since the launch of FocusFirst in November 2004, more than 3,380 student volunteers have screened more than 347,500 children in all 67 counties across Alabama. FocusFirst regularly works with 10 colleges, and UA leads and coordinates the state-wide screening efforts. Since 2004, more than 1,000 UA students have participated with FocusFirst, screening 23,949 children in 14 counties. Thirty-eight UA students participated in screenings across eight counties during the 2016-17 academic year, reaching more than 1,700 children.**

"Early vision screenings are such a simple and sustainable way to help future generations succeed," says Rebecca Rakowitz, a sophomore from Stamford, Conn., majoring in journalism. Rakowitz served as a student leader in Honors College's Health Action service-learning program in 2016.

Health Action is one of four Honors Action programs that take place the week before fall-semester classes begin. Students earn academic credit through UH 103 Honors Action. In 2016, 20 students worked with FocusFirst through Health Action, which informs students about health disparities and provides opportunities for

them to address these inequalities.

Students learned that poor vision, when left untreated, can have negative consequences on children's educational performance, self-esteem and behavior.

Amanda says her initial reaction when she found out her 1 1/2-year-old daughter, Elise, failed the FocusFirst screening at her daycare was that Elise must have been moving during the screening. After her follow-up appointment with an eye doctor, Elise was rushed to a specialist for emergency care.

Elise has Coats' disease, a rare condition in which blood vessels behind the retina break and leak fluid, permanently damaging the retina. If not treated early, Coats' disease almost always leads to permanent blindness in the affected eye, and removal of the eye is usually necessary.

"If she hadn't had the screening, we would never have known anything was wrong with her eye until it was too late to save it," Amanda says. "Now she still has a chance to be anything she wants to be."

Even when problems are detected, correcting them can be a challenge for many families. "My first thought was I can't get him an appointment because I don't have in-

urance," says Erin Hughen, whose son Cayden was diagnosed with a congenital cataract. "Sight Savers has helped a lot instead of having to pay out of pocket."

Calloway says his experience with FocusFirst changed his perspective of his own background. "It really showed me poverty in a way that I hadn't seen it," he says. "I grew up thinking my town was pretty poor, but seeing the areas I was in showed me how privileged I was to grow up in the place I did."

Volunteering with FocusFirst was a unique and humbling experience, Rakowitz says. "It made me feel connected to the community and that I, as a college student, can make a difference in community members' lives," she says.

FocusFirst is a signature initiative of the UA Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility and Impact America, a nonprofit housed at The University of Alabama that collaborates with 30 colleges and universities in four states to implement service-learning projects that engage students in addressing human and community needs while enhancing their sense of social and civic responsibility.

**To learn more about FocusFirst, visit [cesr.ua.edu](http://cesr.ua.edu).**