



PRESS RELEASE

Pledge To FSU College of Education To Benefit Disability Students

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By Connie Harris

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. -- Eight-month-old Paloma Rambana, born with a rare eye disorder, may owe her vision to the work of current and former students from Florida State University's Program in Visual Impairment. Now, the infant's parents are showing their gratitude by pledging money to a scholarship fund for future students of the program.

Neil St. John Rambana and Elizabeth Ricci of the Tallahassee law offices of Rambana & Ricci P.A. recently made a scholarship pledge in the amount of \$20,000 to the College of Education at FSU. The scholarship will be awarded for the fall and spring semesters for the next 10 years.

The gift reflects Rambana and Ricci's personal interest in extending educational opportunities for international students and life-enriching international opportunities for domestic students for whom international study may not otherwise be an option. The award will be made at the discretion of the visual disabilities program.

"This pledge provides the program with a great deal of flexibility in supporting students with the greatest need who are preparing to be teachers of children with visual impairments," said Sandra Lewis, associate professor and coordinator of the Program in Visual Impairment, a part of the College of Education's department of childhood education, reading and disability services. Lewis said the designation of the award specifically for international students, or those wishing to study internationally, fills a void left by current tuition-support funding.

The scholarship is being established in honor of the couple's 8-month-old daughter, Paloma, who was born with Peter's Anomaly, a rare visual impairment whose cause is not known. Days after she was born, doctors told the parents that Paloma would never see. Shortly thereafter, Ricci was put in contact with Jennifer Crowder, a recent graduate from the department's bachelor's program who works with infants diagnosed with visual impairments and their families. Crowder contacted Lewis, who assigned Nandini Menon to work with Paloma and her family on a regular basis. Crowder and Menon - who hopes to return to her native India to work with children with visual impairments - are master's students in FSU's Program in Visual Impairment.

Ricci said she was able to see a difference in Paloma's reaction to visual cues soon after the intervention began. At eight months, doctors have confirmed that Paloma has visual capabilities that may be useful to her.

"Paloma has improved, in large part, because of Dr. Lewis' suggested interventions and the students' compassion. Even her doctors are amazed," Ricci said.

"There are windows of opportunity during which important skills, if introduced, can sometimes be mastered," Lewis said. "Paloma's parents are convinced that she sees better than the doctors originally predicted because of the educators who have created learning activities that involve looking at and following objects that she can see. Windows of opportunity to master other skills will arise in the future, and educators can predict when these opportunities will arise and be ready with strategies that the family can use to make the most of them."

The benefits of the interventions administered by those within the College of Education are reciprocal. Although Paloma is just 8 months old, Lewis said she has taught the FSU students involved in her case valuable skills and given them a rare understanding of how a visually impaired infant experiences the world and how the world around that child reacts.

"I consider it an honor for our students to have the chance to work with Paloma and to be able to put what they've learned to practical use," said Marcy Driscoll, dean of the College of Education. "To receive a gift of this nature - in recognition of the students' ability to make a difference - means so much to the college and our students."

Peter's Anomaly causes the central part of the cornea - which is the focusing mechanism at the front of the human eye - to be hazy, causing blurred vision. The worse the haziness, the more impairment the patient will have. Those diagnosed with the condition often develop other problems with their eyes, including glaucoma, cataracts and retinal detachment.

Established in 1963, the Program in Visual Impairment at FSU is one of the oldest in the country. It is the only program of its kind in the Southeast, with specializations in teaching children with visual impairments, rehabilitation teaching of adults who are blind, and orientation and mobility. There is a tremendous need throughout the country for professionals trained in these areas.

For more information about the program or the scholarship, please visit www.coe.fsu.edu/cerds or e-mail Lewis at lewis@mail.coe.fsu.edu.

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