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“Oh my God, I can see. ... I can see all the way over there.”

Victoria Marez, Golden Gate Middle School student



DANIA MAXWELL/STAFF

Briana Desravines tries on a new pair of eyeglasses Tuesday at Golden Gate Middle School. “Whoa, it’s so clear,” she said.

See better, learn better

■ Donated glasses open new windows of opportunity for Collier students

By Kristine Gill

kmgill@naplesnews.com; 239-403-6174

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For a video report and more photos

From his seat at a cafeteria bench, Juan Torres, 12, couldn’t read the yellow “reserved for students” sign on the table across from him.

His Golden Gate Middle School classmate, Esteban Perez, 12, couldn’t make out the words on the red “exit” sign over the doors, although he knew what it said.

In class, each admitted it was easier to look off a friend’s worksheet than to try

to read the board.

“I’d always ask my partner to tell me the answer,” added Victoria Marez, 13.

“That’s what I did every day,” Juan said.

On Tuesday, the trio was among 100 Golden Gate Middle School students who each received two free pairs of glasses — one for home and one for

school — through the Florida Vision Quest program, which has screened and outfitted more than 170,000 at-risk or underprivileged students across the state since its inception.

“Oh my God, I can see,” Victoria said after shoving a pair of pink translucent frames onto her face. “I can see all the way over there.”

Trustees with Naples Children & Education Foundation, founders of Naples

See GLASSES, 4A



DANIA MAXWELL/STAFF

Kelly Haynes, right, executive director of Vision Quest, matches prescription eyeglasses to a student at Golden Gate Middle School on Tuesday.

GLASSES

from 1A

Winter Wine Festival, raised \$750,000 to pay for testing and frames for Collier County students. About 7,500 students were tested and about 20 percent are expected to need glasses.

Juan and Victoria had glasses before. But Juan's last visit to an eye doctor was in 2008, and he lost his eyeglasses over the summer. Victoria's were broken.

"I never saw that before," Juan said after trying his new frames on and pointing to words on signs across the cafeteria.

Kelly Haynes, executive director of Florida Vision Quest, shared the story of her vision problems with students after they got their glasses. As a fifth-grader, she told them she earned Ds and Fs in school and sat in the back of the classroom chatting with friends. Teachers and her mother thought she just needed to work harder

and pay attention. She failed fifth grade, but when they learned she needed glasses, everything changed.

Without glasses, "I couldn't see the big 'E' on the eye chart," said Haynes, who started earning top grades in school.

While screening students in Collier a few weeks ago, Haynes said she encountered those who had never had corrective lenses, students who lost their glasses or needed an update prescription. Struggling in school, she told them, could be a result

of those problems.

"It's not them; it's a vision issue," she said.

Superintendent Kamela Patton spoke to students alongside trustees from the education foundation.

"The key phrase for this whole program is if you can't see, you can't learn," Trustee John Scot Mueller said.

Following the assembly, the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students were dismissed for class.

"Put your glasses on," Juan told his friends. "Let's go."