

Guiding Girl Scouts to Learn More About Eyes and Optometry

By Maria Santullo Richman, OD, FAAO, and Marietta Richman

Girl Scouts teaches girls so much: leadership, team-building, entrepreneurship and more. Between us, we have several decades of experience with the Girl Scout program and have benefitted from what it offered us as girls and adults. But we realized that we could leverage this program that we love to help young people learn more about the profession we're in. What better way to teach young people about optometry and the importance of eye health than to let them see it in person?

With this in mind, we have teamed up to create a new way to introduce girls to optometry. In cooperation with Girl Scouts of the USA, we've created the Vision Awareness Program, which lets scouts earn a patch by visiting an optometry practice and taking part in other activities, such as learning how vision problems can affect school activities.

We have a two-sided document that ODs can display in their offices to help introduce the program -- and Girl Scouts -- to new patients and their families. One side shows the Vision Awareness patch and tells them how to get started. The other side lists the requirements. Girl Scouts of all ages are eligible to participate in the program.

We formally launched this program in our home state of New Jersey, at our practice, Shore Family Eyecare in Manasquan. We began in February 2018 at the Winter CE meeting of the New Jersey Society of Optometric Physicians (NJSOP), with support from the Dr. Richard J. Favreau Health Foundation, a charitable organization in New Jersey that is named for a former NJSOP president.

Part of getting this effort started was reaching out to optometrists and Girl Scout councils across the state. In the first year, approximately 1,000 Girl Scouts in New Jersey have earned this patch. Our next goal is to reach out to the American Optometric Association and offer this program to all state AOA affiliates.

It took months of promoting the program to get the word out to the Girl Scout troops, but we eventually needed to create a separate appointment book just for troop visits. We have a large pediatric practice, so whenever a young girl accompanies her

parents for an eye exam, we ask if she is a Girl Scout. It's a great way of breaking the ice and discussing the program, which is free to all participants.

Here's some of what we do during the troop visits:

- Show them a pretest room and exam room and let them experience some of what an optometrist does during an eye exam
- Turn on the slit lamp and explain its purpose
- Show them a normal fundus photo and let them see how a photo is taken and what it can reveal
- Offer a hands-on session using the CCTV and electronic magnifiers so they can experience how a visually impaired child is able to see and read the same as other students

Earning the patch requires two other steps in addition to visiting an optometry practice. Girls can learn and share information, by making a poster during National Save Your Vision Month in March for a school promoting eye health, or they can learn about nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism. Troops can also run an eyeglass donation drive and learn about the steps toward a career in optometry.

Dr. Richman is a low vision and vision rehabilitation specialist at Shore Family Eye Care, a former Girl Scout and a Girl Scout leader. Marietta Richman, a paraoptometric at her parents' practice, was recently honored as AOA's Paraoptometric Community Service Award for the development of the NJ Girl Scout Vision Awareness Badge. She is a Girl Scout Gold Award recipient.