



DR. MICHAEL SIEBERT'S
VISION
 FOR SUCCESS

BY MARTIN HARO | PHOTO BY DALE STINE

Being an eye doctor isn't that easy. People often put off going to see an eye doctor because they think that waiting a bit longer won't do any harm. But, pardon the pun, there is more to it than meets the eye.

ers to an outstanding member of our community this week. He's already well known by many since he enjoys hanging out with friends at his usual places, like the Palace on Ocean Drive. What's so special about him is that Dr. Siebert strives to not only provide the best eye care for his patients (in a very cool, non-threatening office), but goes beyond the ordinary for them and those less fortunate, too.

One local South Beach practitioner, Dr. Michael Siebert, approaches eye medicine differently than other physicians do because he knows that "one's eyes are not separate from the rest of the body." This simple observation is what sets Dr. Siebert apart from others.

treatments, as well as nutritional counseling and spiritual guidance.

He prefers to look at the overall health and even the diet of patient, instead of concentrating on their eyes only. Dr. Siebert also provides his patients with other options aside from traditional medicine at his practice, including holistic

Furthermore, Dr. Siebert is an exemplary philanthropist. He works closely with organizations that have allowed him to provide free eye care and glasses to countless local children, and thousands of patients in such countries as Honduras, Nicaragua, and Cambodia.

That's why *Wire* wanted to more formally introduce our read-

He is about to celebrate his new South Beach practice's first anniversary. So the next time you think about putting off seeing the eye doctor, think of Dr. Michael Siebert and the array of services he offers. He's a great man, as well as a competent eye practitioner.

To make an appointment with Dr. Siebert, call 305.672.8513, or stop by his office at 1354 Washington Ave., Suite 223, Miami Beach. For more information of Dr. Siebert, visit www.drmicrohalsiebert.com.

What is your approach to eye medicine?

Vision is much more than seeing with the eyes. I see it more as

how one views the world. If one chooses to see the world with a new "lens," he or she can change almost anything. In addition to using the most advanced technology for diagnostic purposes, I offer an alternative management approach to eye disease. If a patient prefers traditional medicine, I am more than happy to provide that care to them and it is necessary in certain situations. Services available at my practice range from laser vision correction (LVC) to vision therapy, which is mainly used with children, but adults can benefit from this, as well. For example, I have a young boy who visits my office once a week. Initially, another doctor gave him glasses, but the mother did not want this approach. He was diagnosed with +6.00 diopters of hyperopia – this is farsightedness and a lot of it – so writing, reading, and drawing were difficult for him. After 10 sessions of vision therapy his prescription has been reduced to +3.00 diopters. In addition, his observation or motor skills have improved and he even notes the difference in his vision.

Something that's obviously a departure from tradition is your workspace. Can you describe the style and atmosphere of your practice?

I wanted the "office" to be as open as possible so that my clients will feel welcomed and comfortable. I also created a space that is full of color. Since many of my patients are children, I wanted the office to be fun for them, so there are trampolines, balance boards, and jump ropes because of the vision therapy aspect of my practice. By working on patients gross motor skills along with fine motor skills (visual activities), the vision will improve with consistent weekly therapy. I simply find most of the equipment in a traditional optometry office to be ugly and outdated, so I decided to purchase a cool Italian chair instead of the traditional chair and stand that you find in all other offices. Also, all of my equipment is hand-held and portable, which increases my flexibility and allows me to perform services outside of the office if needed.

When and why did you set up your practice? What did you do before this?

I opened my practice November 15, 2004. I have always desired a modern practice with a unique style. In addition, I wanted to offer patients an alternative, more natural approach to the management of eye problems. I have been involved in all aspects of my profession, all the way from traditional retail to teaching optometry students in a hospital setting. Having my own practice seemed to be the next step for me. I graduated from the New England College of Optometry in Boston, Mass., and completed my internship training at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami. I fell in love with Miami and never returned to Boston and that was seven years ago. I taught in Europe as a Clinical Professor at Hogeschool van Utrecht, in the Netherlands. And this European influence provided me with experience and knowledge of alternative treatments for various ocular problems that are not commonly practiced in the United States.

Describe what you do with your patients. A lot of people think that going to the eye doctor is all about reading letters on a chart from a distance, but there has to be more to eye health than that, right?

I feel that in my office we go beyond the standard of care in the profession. All patients receive a visual field screening, a test that can detect early glaucoma and is also capable of picking up tumors along the visual pathways. We also test corneal thickness to give true eye pressure readings. This testing is also used for laser vision correction. I like to look at a patient's diet and overall health. One's eyes are not separate from the rest of the body. Many systemic diseases have ocular issues and many people do not realize this connection. For example, a person can have Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS) and have an iritis associated with it. If one treats the iritis only rather than the area where the real problem is, the bowel, that is really not helping the patient. This is why I offer detoxification programs to help patients "clean out their pipes" and support his or her overall well being. Lastly, an iritis that does not respond to typical treatment is a red flag that there may be a systemic problem, such as HIV, so treating more than just the eye can help discover something else. I also offer sessions in nutritional counseling, spiritual guidance, iridology, and color therapy.

Tell us a little bit about your background. How have your past experiences shaped and helped you get to where you are now.

I grew up in a large Catholic family of five; I am the youngest. My mother died when I was young and she was a nurse, so I spent a lot of time being surrounded by the medical profession, and I always knew I would be a doctor. During my graduate studies, I had a unique patient experience that was instrumental in my current approach to vision. One day a patient came to visit me complaining of poor vision, even though she was 20/20. After testing her visual field and peripheral vision, I noticed her ability to see beyond straight ahead was extremely reduced. This particular woman had recently suffered the loss of her husband and because she was so focused on the bad of event of losing her husband; she was not able to see the "big picture," and her vision reflected this in the tunnel vision. This experience led me to investigate alternative methods and other reasons why one's vision might be labeled as "poor." In addition, I used to work for an investment bank in New York City and I was miserable in that job. One day, I came home from work and my face was paralyzed. I went to the doctor and was diagnosed with Bell's Palsy and received no direction or comfort from the doctor. I am thankful for the experience because it taught me how not to



Photos: Dr. Michael Siebert during his trip to Cambodia



behave with a patient. I quickly realized what the experience meant for me, and within two weeks I decided to quit my job and pursue my career in optometry. Almost immediately, as soon as I took action and made the necessary changes in my life, my face became fully functional again. This experience was also very influential in teaching me that a "disease" is simply our body's way of communicating with us, and that a message is waiting for us to hear.

Tell us about your charitable trips to other countries. What do they entail and what does it take to set them up successfully?

I mainly travel with two groups: Gift of Sight (GOS) and Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH). This past year I did three missions with GOS, most recently to Cambodia

in August. GOS works closely with The Lions Club International in coordinating the 40,000 pairs of glasses that are needed for a mission, as well as assisting in organizing local translators. There are six or seven doctors on each mission and we generally see about 3,000-4,000 patients per day and we spend eight days between two cities in the country we are visiting. In Cambodia, we examined 28,250 people during our visit to Pre Veng and Kampot. It was an amazing experience and the people are so colorful. Aside from the work I enjoy photography and I love to photograph the people of each country I visit. I usually take a lot of sepia photographs on the missions, but because the colors were so rich and vibrant in Cambodia, I opted to shoot only in color.

Oftentimes doctors wait until late in their lives and careers to do charitable work. How come you are doing it now?

When I was 17 I lived with the McElroy family in my hometown of Topeka, Kan. Bob and Jean McElroy opened their home to me during a difficult period in my life. Bob is a general surgeon and volunteered his time in Africa on several occasions. Their willingness to give and open their home to me made a major impression upon me, and as a gift back I continue to give of my time to help others in need.

What is it like to go to Bolivia, Honduras, or Cambodia to do this work? How do people there react to you?

I was "bit" by the travel bug when I lived in Europe and have continued to travel since that time. I love to go to new places and places that people do not normally visit. It is hard to describe in words how people react to me when I am working on a mission, but I can tell you that a smile goes a very long way. As for me, the outpouring of emotion, of love that one can feel from the people is sometimes overwhelming.

Are you doing any charitable work locally?

I work closely with The Heiken Children's Vision Fund. Three to four days per week I visit a local school and help provide free eye care and glasses to children who cannot afford to see an eye doctor. We have a mobile unit that is decked out with all the latest equipment and we see about 20 kids a day.

Looking back at the past year, you've opened your own practice, you've done all this amazing work helping others.... How does it feel?

It makes me very happy, and I am grateful to be able to share that happiness with others.