

## **Case Study**

### **Tackling VISION CARE Disparities** **How one nonprofit uses an NFL team's celebrity to improve poor children's eyesight-**

**By Melinda Tuan & Fay Twersky**

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*How one nonprofit uses an  
NFL team's celebrity to improve  
poor children's eyesight –  
and life chances*

# Tackling VISION CARE Disparities



How can nonprofits leverage sports celebrity to reach underserved populations?

How do they skillfully manage complex partnerships between nonprofit, for-profit, and government organizations?

WHEN NFL OFFENSIVE LINE-man Jermaine Mayberry was 16 years old, he was diagnosed with amblyopia, or “lazy eye,” and was pronounced legally blind in his left eye.

“I thought everyone saw the way I did,” he recalls, noting that no one else in his rural Texas hometown had noticed his eye problem, either. “But when I got into high school, I was having trouble seeing out of my good eye, because the strain of overcompensating had finally caught up with me.” Mayberry later learned that, had his eyes been checked when he was a child, his amblyopia could have been easily corrected by wearing an eye patch.

Despite his impaired vision, Mayberry was the Philadelphia Eagles’ No. 1 draft pick in 1996, when he was 22 years old. “Before the draft, I told my agent that wherever I go, I would like to give something back to the community,” he says. And so during his

first season with the Eagles, Mayberry linked up with Eagles Youth Partnership – an independent nonprofit organization, affiliated with the football team, that delivers health and education services to children living in poverty – and hatched a plan to bring eye care to the underserved children of Philadelphia.

Within a few months, and with Mayberry’s initial contribution of \$50,000, Eagles Youth Partnership launched the Eagles Eye Mobile, its first direct service program. The mobile program takes its services directly to children who would otherwise not get vision care. It is one of only two mobile pediatric vision care units in the country, and the only one that is affiliated with a sports team.

When the mobile visits a school, it provides students who have failed Pennsylvania’s mandatory vision screening with a free eye exam and, if needed, referrals for further medical

by MELINDA TUAN & FAY TWERSKY



A child who has just received a free eye exam aboard the Eagles Eye Mobile stands with Christina Weiss Lurie, president of Eagles Youth Partnership, the nonprofit arm of the Philadelphia Eagles football team and operator of the eye mobile.



treatment. Later, mobile staff and partners deliver the children's prescription glasses, as well as take children with referrals to their follow-up appointments – all free of charge.

In the past nine years, the Eagles Eye Mobile program has served more than 13,000 public school children in Philadelphia, and has been on the road 130-150 days a year. With this experience, the mobile's staff has learned not only how to use the fame of the Philadelphia Eagles for social change, but also how to manage sometimes-tricky partnerships with local non-profit, private, and governmental organizations.

### A Blind Spot in Healthcare

National studies show that over 21 percent of children ages 6-17 have trouble seeing.<sup>1</sup> Philadelphia shows similar trends: More than 14,000 of the school district's 200,000 children failed their mandatory vision screening in 2001-2002.

Yet only 5,000 of these Philadelphia schoolchildren received glasses or treatment.<sup>2</sup> Many of the remaining 9,000 children come from poor families, whose lack of money, transportation, organization, and knowledge means that their eye problems are likely to remain untreated.

"And when children can't see," points out Mayberry, "they have no chance. They can't learn. They can't succeed."

The Eagles Eye Mobile targets children living in poverty, serving schools where more than 80 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch (that is, their families are at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level – income of about \$19,000 for a family of four in Philadelphia). By giving these underserved children free vision care, the mobile aims to improve not only their eyesight, but also their chances for academic achievement.



Optometrist Dr. Carter Liotta examines a child's vision on board the Eagles Eye Mobile, parked outside the child's school in Philadelphia.

### Using Fame to Reach the Forgotten

The mobile draws on the Philadelphia Eagles' popularity to make children feel welcome, comfortable, and eager to have their eyes examined.

Take, for example, the case of an eighth-grader named Michael Ful-

ton. When the Eagles Eye Mobile pulled into his school's parking lot, Michael was reading at only a fourth-grade level. The school nurse thought that Michael might have a vision problem, and so recommended that the mobile staff examine him.

Michael was excited to board the

flashy 36-foot vehicle, decorated in the football team's colors of midnight green, black, and white, and emblazoned with pictures of the Eagles mascot and Mayberry himself – both bespectacled. On board the mobile, Michael waited in an area decorated with photographs and autographs of Eagles players who wear glasses. Michael then received a comprehensive eye exam from medical staff dressed in Eagles apparel, and discovered that he needed glasses.

Two weeks later, eye mobile partners brought Michael his free prescription glasses and an Eagles eyeglass cloth. When the optician fitted the glasses to his face, Michael could not believe his eyes: The blurry blobs in his books instantly organized into recognizable words. The next week, Michael tested at the seventh-grade level on his reading test – a jump of three grade levels.

Children's zeal for all things Eagles sometimes presents an unforeseen challenge: Up to five children per day (out of a possible 25) fake their eye exams in order to receive glasses from the Eagles. To separate the truly impaired from the merely enthusiastic, mobile staff introduced a pair of plano glasses – frames with clear, nonprescription lenses – to the exam. Children whose vision is miraculously restored by the plano glasses are told that they don't need glasses at this time, are encouraged to get their eyes checked next year, and are given a new book and an Eagles football card.

"The Eagles Eye Mobile is the Pied Piper of vision care in Philadelphia," explains Sarah Martinez-Helfman, executive director of Eagles Youth Partnership. "When you dress up a critical service like this in an Eagles jersey, all the kids want to be part of it."

The Eagles affiliation not only excites schoolchildren's interest, but also inspires parents' cooperation. To



The original mobile, featuring Eagles lineman Jermaine Mayberry and a bespectacled Eagles mascot, invites children aboard for an eye exam.

be examined on the eye mobile, children need their parent or guardian to sign a consent form. While consent rates for the dental van, immunizations, and other programs are only in the 10 percent to 20 percent range, rates for the Eagles Eye Mobile range from 25 percent to 50 percent. Indeed, parents sometimes appear in person

as we love the Eagles, they love us right back, and they do it in grass-roots kinds of ways."

### Making Eagles Partnerships Fly

The Philadelphia Eagles' fame also makes it easy for the program to attract the many partners it needs to deliver its services. Getting the right mix of

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when the mobile comes to their children's school, hoping to spot an Eagles player.

Both parents and school staff also trust the Eagles. "I don't need to do much to assure parents that the Eagles have only good intentions," observes a school nurse. Pamela Young, principal of Alcom Academics Plus School, likewise comments, "As much

partners, though, has required some tinkering.

Upon its creation in June 1996, the Eagles Eye Mobile easily brokered a partnership with Wills Eye Hospital, a nonprofit that already provided eye care to Eagles football players. Wills agreed to supply an onboard ophthalmologist and in-hospital appointments for children, and the eyeglass shop

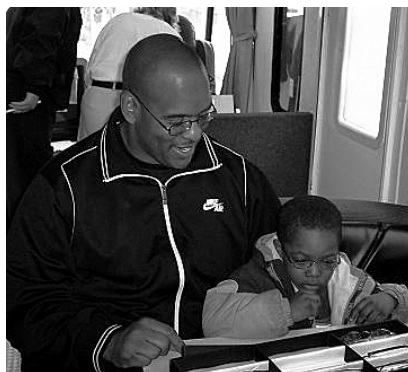


located inside Wills agreed to manufacture, deliver, and fit the prescription glasses.

The eyeglass shop initially delivered high-quality services and products. After two years, though, the shop's senior management and optician were replaced by new owners and staff who did not want to provide pro bono products and services to the eye mobile. Orders arrived late and incomplete, and the shop began charging a fee.

The mobile's staff quickly ended the partnership with the eyeglass shop, and for the next several years struggled to find another provider. They contracted with vendors ranging from a man who manufactured glasses in his home, to a local nonprofit optometry school, to a national eyeglass chain. But no one delivered the quality or service the mobile needed. For example, one vendor would send mountains of backlogged eyeglasses to Eagles Youth Partnership, where a staff member would first have to match them with the original prescriptions, and then sort them for delivery to dozens of schools.

Finally, in 2004, the Eagles Eye Mobile contracted with Partners in Vision, a for-profit eyeglass company that provides quality glasses and timely delivery at less than cost. The company's owner, Judd Sky, says he is motivated not only by his love for the Eagles, but also by the great satisfaction he finds in "giving the opportunity of sight to underprivileged children."



**Mayberry helps a child pick out his frames on the Eagles Eye Mobile. Students flock to the mobile for eye exams, sometimes faking poor vision in hopes of a chance meeting with an Eagles football player.**

The eye mobile also eventually ended its partnership with Wills Eye Hospital. In late 2002, the School District of Philadelphia asked the eye mobile to operate year-round, and Wills could not meet the increased need for pro bono services. As a result, the eight-year relationship with the eye hospital ended.

Martinez-Helfman and staff then negotiated an agreement with St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, a for-profit institution owned by Tenet Healthcare Corporation. Changing from Wills to St. Christopher's allowed Eagles Youth Partnership to explore partnering with optometrists (who specialize in performing eye exams and prescribing glasses) instead of ophthalmologists (medical doctors who

specialize in eye diseases and surgery). Whereas Wills ophthalmologists preferred to dilate children's eyes at follow-up appointments in the hospital, St. Christopher's optometrists were willing to dilate their eyes on board the mobile.<sup>3</sup>

Dilating children's eyes on the mobile resulted in more eyeglass prescriptions with fewer referrals, with the percentage of students prescribed glasses on the eye mobile jumping from 36 percent to 77 percent between 2003 and 2004.

But there was an unanticipated downside to switching hospitals. Unlike Wills, St. Christopher's required parents to accompany their children to follow-up appointments, instead of allowing the school district to take the kids to the hospital without their parents (as had been Wills' policy). This policy stemmed from St. Christopher's philosophy that, as a children's hospital, it should involve families in their children's care.

But the Eagles Eye Mobile staff quickly learned that parents were not reliable conveyors of their children: Out of the 245 children referred for further treatment in 2003-2004, only 24 (10 percent) actually came. In other words, 221 children in greatest need of care went without it.

In response to these findings, St. Christopher's relaxed its requirements, and now allows the school district to bus children to their appointments without their parents. As a result, approximately half of the children came to their follow-up appointments last year.

While most partners, such as AREUFIT Health Services, which provides staff and maintenance for the vehicle, were eager to join the eye mobile, others were more skeptical. The School District of Philadelphia, for instance, was initially wary because Eagles Youth Partnership had no track record in vision care or direct services. Eventually, after a long series of phone

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calls and meetings, Martinez-Helfman and the head of all nonacademic services agreed to launch a partnership. Martinez-Helfman then enlisted the aid of Carrie Gethers and Diane Davis, both respected and well-liked former school nurse supervisors, who convinced school nurses that the eye mobile would help them meet the state's vision screening requirements.

Over time, Eagles Youth Partnership has learned that while fame and popularity may bring potential partners to the table, partnerships work only if everyone is dedicated to the mission. Moreover, the organization has found that there are no hard-and-fast rules governing whether a nonprofit, private, or public entity makes a better partner. In the end, the organization finds, it is the passion, commitment, and skill of the individuals involved that make or break a partnership.

### On the Road to Replication

In January 2005, the Eagles took the eye mobile on the road to the Super Bowl in Jacksonville, Fla. While there, the eye mobile visited several economically depressed neighborhoods in North Jacksonville, where Eagles players Lito Sheppard and Brian Dawkins spent their childhoods. Optometrists volunteered in exchange for Super Bowl tickets. In just four days, the Eagles Eye Mobile examined 80 children, 78 of whom received prescription glasses that same week.

In March 2005, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Sports Philanthropy Project awarded Eagles Youth Partnership the inaugural Steve Patterson Sports Philanthropy Award for its work on the Eagles Eye Mobile. Because of these achievements, several professional sports teams have asked Eagles Youth Partnership to distill the secrets of their successes.

Eagles Youth Partnership staff first underscore the importance of

the organization's status as a separate entity, rather than as part of the football team's public relations or marketing department. "A team could not do this just for PR purposes," explains Martinez-Helfman. "There are a lot of bumps in the road, and the road never gets smooth. You have

**"Can you imagine if all 32 NFL teams used their celebrity to make vision care a priority for the children in their city?"**

to do this because you want to transform lives."

Eagles Youth Partnership staff and partners also suggest that their program may be uniquely suited to vision care. "[Vision care] attacks a finite problem," explains Dr. Charles Vinocur, surgeon-in-chief at St. Christopher's Hospital. "It's a one-shot intervention." In contrast, treating asthma or obesity on a mobile unit may not be as effective, because these problems require longer-term and more closely monitored interventions. Vision care is also appealing because it usually does not involve pain, with which sports teams might not want to associate themselves.

Eagles Youth Partnership staff further point out that demand for vision care is high. "We know that one-fifth of kids in the United States have vision needs. We also know that many of these kids hang on every word of their local sports heroes. Can you imagine if all 32 NFL teams used their celebrity to make vision care a priority for the children in their city?" Martinez-Helfman likewise notes that other sports organizations, such as the National Hockey League or Major League Baseball teams, could replicate the eye mobile.

### The Mobile After Mayberry

In 2005, after nine years of volunteering his name, time, and \$117,500 to the Eagles Eye Mobile, Mayberry's contract with the Philadelphia Eagles ended, and he joined the New Orleans Saints. But the Eagles Eye Mobile rolls on, in part because Eagles Youth Partnership

positioned it as an Eagles team effort, rather than as Mayberry's pet project.

Mayberry's departure from the Eagles did result in some changes. The mobile formerly featured Mayberry and the Eagles mascot sporting glasses. The new vehicle is festooned with pictures of Andy Reid, the Eagles coach, and players Dhani Jones, Brian Dawkins, and Greg Lewis wearing glasses. There is still an inset photo of Mayberry, though, to commemorate his founding role. And instead of receiving a Jermaine Mayberry football card, as children had in the past, they now receive Reid, Jones, Dawkins, or Lewis cards.

Surveying his legacy, Mayberry concludes: "To think that my problem could have been totally prevented was the whole reason behind the Eye Mobile. Regardless of what happens, this program will keep going because its effects have been amazing." □

1 Ganley, J.P. and Roberts, J. "Eye Conditions and Related Need for Medical Care Among Persons 1-74 Years of Age: United States, 1971-1972," *Vital Health Stat* 11, no. 228 (1983): p. 21, table 1.

2 Data collected by School District of Philadelphia school nurses.

3 It is often necessary to dilate children's eyes in order to prescribe their glasses accurately.