

The Crimson White

McElroy aids in FocusFirst program

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by Amanda Sams

Some people may have been surprised to find Crimson Tide quarterback Greg McElroy holding a grinning child on his lap the Wednesday morning before the Duke game. The athlete sat in a faded cinder block building on 2nd Street to administer a vision screening test for the 100,000th child to participate in Impact Alabama's FocusFirst Initiative.



Tristian Lucious, 4, sits on Greg McElroy's lap to have his vision screened at the Tuscaloosa Headstart. / CW | Drew Hoover

“I found out about FocusFirst a few weeks ago, and this is actually my first experience working with them,” McElroy said. “I feel really blessed to be a part of such an important milestone.”

FocusFirst opened its doors seven years ago to provide vision screening for children 6 months to 5 years old who come from low-income families in the state's rural and urban areas and would not otherwise have access to treatment.

“We mainly focus on kids who are younger than school age, because the early years are so crucial in learning to read letters and numbers,” said Stephen Black, director of the Center for Ethics & Social Responsibility and founder of Impact Alabama. “Eleven percent of the children we screen are found to have vision problems.”

FocusFirst partners with the non-profit organization Sight Savers America, a group of optometrists and ophthalmologists who are willing to see low-income children for free in order to provide them with necessary treatment. FocusFirst screened 29,000 children in 2009 and hopes to screen 30,000 in the upcoming year, Black said.

A distinctive aspect of FocusFirst is that college students perform most of the screenings under the supervision of staff members.

“There are two sides to FocusFirst,” Black said. “We wanted to figure out a way to make a positive impact on the community and also get college students involved. Many students take for granted the ability to go see a doctor regularly.”

McElroy said he understands the significant role that good vision plays in everyday life, from reading a book to catching a football.

“I am very near sighted and almost legally blind,” McElroy said. “I understand how difficult it is to read when vision isn’t 100 percent. I thought it would be beneficial to take an hour out of my day to come help these kids.”

As the screening was performed, McElroy assisted five children, smiling and speaking encouraging words to them while their eyes were checked.

“Keep after your dreams, and work as hard as you possibly can,” McElroy said. “If you are willing to make the sacrifices necessary, then you should be able to accomplish anything you want to do.”