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‘Extreme Makeover: Home Edition’ calls on NJ optometrist to help design home for family with iris disease

DENVILLE – When the people behind the popular ABC reality TV show *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* needed a low-vision specialist to provide eye care to a family with the hereditary disease called aniridia, they looked no further than New Jersey optometric physician Ron Siwoff, O.D., FAAO.

Siwoff, a member of the New Jersey Society of Optometric Physicians, was asked to volunteer as an eye consultant for the six-member Llanes family of Bergen County, four of whom were born without irises. Doctors’ services on the show typically are provided behind the scenes, but Siwoff recognized the difficulties of designing a home that would meet the Llanes family’s unique needs and offered to help the design team.

Siwoff, whose patients come from as far as Greece, Italy, Ireland and Israel, presented a unique idea that would make this new home even more meaningful for the Llanes family. He created a way to help the TV design team personally experience the same challenges the visually impaired family struggles with every day. Siwoff dilated team members’ eyes and then had them wear special spectacles to simulate the eye disease, enabling them to vicariously experience the family’s vision.

“It totally changed the way the design team looked at the house,” Siwoff said. “Off-camera, they really were not acting. They couldn’t see. Through this experience, they were able to better understand that although people with aniridia need plenty of light to function maximally, if there’s too much glare or bright lights, vision can worsen and become painful. For instance, the glare from a nearby white tent hurt the design team’s eyes, and it was then that they realized that controlling the glare was crucial for this family.

“The team marveled at the experience, and the results greatly helped them improve the design of the house,” Siwoff said.

In addition, Siwoff worked closely with the designers to ensure that special care was taken to provide textures within the home. He explained that blind people need to *feel* the floor surface change to warn them that they are standing in front of a flight of steps, for example. As a result, the builders incorporated textural changes in the flooring to denote different areas as a way of helping the two blind and two visually impaired family members move around the home.

Siwoff is grateful to New Jersey contractor Brian Stolar, president of the Pinnacle Group in Bergen County, for recommending him to the show. Stolar knew of Siwoff’s work and told ABC about Siwoff’s expertise in low-vision diseases, which cannot be aided by routine eye care methodology. But thanks to Stolar, Siwoff and the *Extreme Makeover* team, within one week, the house was completely transformed from an obstacle to an aid.

“What’s amazing about this show is that really gives people hope,” Siwoff said. “It shows people that if you have an eye problem, there is something that can be done, and it’s called low vision rehabilitation.”

The *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* featuring Dr. Siwoff and the Llanes family is scheduled to air 7-9 p.m. Sunday, Sept. 17 on ABC. For more information, visit www.njsop.org, or <http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome/index.html>.

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