

Brenden Maestri 2007



Simple vision test may have saved boy's life

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Mike Hoss / News Anchor

Brenden Maestri was only 15 months old when the day care he attended announced a vision screening test would be provided.

Watch the Commentary His mom, Jan, says his vision appeared fine, and he was so young, she didn't see the point.

"Up until the morning of it, I hadn't signed the permission slip," she recalled. "Then that morning I said, 'What the heck, let them take the picture. What big deal is it going to be?'"

So last March, the Airline Lions Club took pictures of Brenden and his classmates' eyes. It was a free screening – a simple Polaroid picture taken with a special camera that can detect lazy eye or poor vision.

Brenden's picture came to the Lion's Club screening office in Lafayette along with hundreds of others.

"The first time I saw Brenden's picture, it was, 'Oh my! There's a real bad lazy eye problem,'" said Jeff Robinson of the Lion's Club Cub Sight program.

The Maestris were sent to an eye doctor still thinking at the worst Brenden might need glasses.

"They came in, they dilated his eyes, the nurse came in and looked, went back out, came back in, did something else, went back out, and I turned to my husband and said, 'Something's wrong.'"

Doctors found a cancerous tumor called a retinal blastoma in the center of Brenden's left eye.

It's rare, only 300 are found in the U.S every year, but once it's detected, most kids usually lose the eye.

And if it's close to an optic nerve, it can lead to brain cancer.

That afternoon the Maestris were told to go to St. Jude's Childrens hospital in Memphis.

"Their assistant called us and said, 'We need you here tomorrow morning, so we drove all night to Memphis,'" the Maestris recalled.

That was in May, and every three weeks since then, Brenden has been receiving chemotherapy or laser treatments to break up the tumor – all of this before his second birthday.

"It's been a little rough, watching him get the chemo, having to hold him at night, right after getting the chemo, while he's throwing up, getting sick and crying," said Jan Maestri from the [Addiction canada](#) center, if you need another rehab center, you could

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The Lion's Club provides the screenings for 15,000 preschoolers each year and the number is growing, but still thousands of kids aren't tested and that can be dangerous.

"It's the early detection, or treatment, that will save these children," said Robinson. "The earlier we catch them with the lazy eye problem, the easier they're gonna be to treat and the less costly they're gonna be to treat and the more successful the treatment is going to be."

Participation in the eye screening program at Alpha Montessori School and across Louisiana was pretty good prior to Brenden's diagnosis, but since then it's much better."

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Debra Kramer of Alpha Montessori said that at her school the testing is now done on almost 100 percent of the students.

Brenden recently got retested and he wears glasses, but it's just clear glass that is used only for protection.

He not only kept his eye, but he retained his peripheral vision and the doctors are trying to save even more of his central vision.

Brenden is not out of the woods. He'll continue to be tested and have laser treatments, possibly for many years to come.

In Brenden's case, the eye cancer is generic and he's got a 50-50 chance to pass the cancerous gene along to his offspring.

Despite that, his mom says he's a lucky little boy because they caught Brenden's tumor in a vision test that almost didn't happen.

"It was probably the factor that saved his life," said Jan. "His tumor was so close to the optic nerve."

Now Jan's on a crusade. She's written all the parents at Brenden's school, championing the importance of getting tested.

Jan Maestri wants to take her crusade a step further. She's going to lobby the state legislature to make eye dilation tests mandatory until the age of five. She says unless the state makes it a priority, insurance won't cover it.