

# Outreach with Vision

A local doctor's efforts to help others maintain their sight.

By Angela Ellenwood

While growing up in Miami, Dr. Michael Bennett says, "There was always a guiding hand that directed me toward swimming." His grandfather built the pool and was the track and swim coach at the University of Miami. When he was 8 years old, Bennett says, "I started doing practices twice a day, swimming roughly four hours a day, through the age of 21." His practice paid off. Bennett's prowess in the pool earned him three junior national titles, a full scholarship from the University of Virginia, two U.S. Olympic swim team trials, and a top 25 world ranking. He was recently inducted into the University of Virginia's Athletic Hall of Fame.

However, after one year as a professional triathlete in Southern California, Bennett realized, "I couldn't exist on my professional athletic talents, so I went to medical school." During his residency and fellowship at Emory University in Atlanta, Bennett specialized in ophthalmology and surgical treatments for sight-threatening diseases of the retina (nerve tissue that turns light into signals that are sent to the brain), vitreous (a colorless, gel-like substance that provides the eye nourishment), and macula (part of the retina responsible for fine, detailed vision).

After completing his training in 1999, Bennett decided the Aloha State was the right place to establish his practice. "Hawai'i is much like Florida was when I was growing up," he says. "It's a family-driven community, the weather is wonderful, and you actually have the ability to make an impact within your community." For some of his patients, Bennett's impact is profound. He enjoys the medical aspects and technical skills involved in his work, but says his true gratification comes from making a difference in people's lives. "The ability to restore vision is something I could not imagine living without."

In 2001, he founded the Retina Institute of Hawai'i, a treatment and research facility dedicated to pre-

venting, suspending or reversing vision loss. As one of only a few vitreoretinal surgeons in the state, Bennett's Neighbor Island offices have improved patient access to this kind of care. "Historically, all retina patients would have to fly to Honolulu for their diagnosis and treatment," he says, "and a lot of patients just can't make the trip."

Unfortunately, says Bennett, by the time he sees many of his patients, their problems are already quite advanced. However, timely examination greatly reduces the risk, and new treatment options greatly improve the results. "If we catch patients early," he says, "we can either prevent total vision loss or restore vision to near their baseline level."

To help do that, Bennett founded the Hawai'i Vision Project, a nonprofit organization and mobile screening service. He has personally paid for a customized recreation vehicle that will travel through O'ahu. Later, Bennett hopes to expand services to the Neighbor Islands. "We will provide free visual system screenings," he says. "I am hoping this project will enable any patient, whether they have insurance or not, to seek the appropriate screening that they need."

This HMSA participating provider and his team give patients the quality of care and attention he would want for himself or his family. This philosophy goes back to his education and mentor at Emory. "Dr. Thomas Aaberg Sr. dictated that even the most minor complaint from a patient is very significant," Bennett recalls. "His compassion toward his patients still amazes me."

Bennett gives patients a full explanation of their condition, a treatment plan in easy-to-understand terms, and counsels them and their families about the terrifying possibility of going blind. "I think [my patients] know that they are family once they walk in the door," he says. "And to allow someone to drive, read, or see their grandkids again when their vision was once threatened is beyond rewarding." **IS**



Michael D. Bennett,  
Retina Institute of Ho