

A4 HAWAII



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## Visionary pilots eye-check van

Derrick Nii has a retinal screening aboard the Project Vision mobile facility.

Derrick Nii, a 35-year-old Wahiawa Middle School counselor, heard an announcement about a free eye exam, then saw a colorful "Project Vision" van.

"The whole look of the mobile vehicle caught our eye," said Nii, who was at the recent Hawaii Okinawa Craft Fair with a friend. "We wanted to check it out."

Mildred Nishiyama, 84, also checked it out. "I said, 'Well, maybe I should go have my eyes checked.' I go once a year. ... It didn't take more than five minutes."

They were among about 200 people who took advantage of free eye screening when Project Vision made its public debut at the Okinawa Fair last month.

Dr. Michael Bennett, president of the Retina Institute of Hawaii, describes Project Vision as "a real health care outreach program," saying many people, especially in outlying areas, don't have access to health care or get into the system until it's too late.

He wanted to do something to make a difference and conceived the idea of a mobile retina-screening unit a few years ago.

"With the advent of all the new technologies now, all the cameras we can put on

board, within 90 seconds we can take a picture of the back of your eyes." "We can make a good accurate diagnosis of eye disorders such as macular degeneration, cataracts and glaucoma and diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, just by looking at pictures of the retina."

About 100,000 isle residents have diabetes, including 25 percent who don't know they have it, Bennett said, so a major goal is to detect signs of retinal disease in this group before irreversible vision loss occurs.

He purchased the 35-foot recreational vehicle in Michigan and had it transported to California where a friend designed it especially for the project.

Screenings at the Okinawa Fair showed "probably a good 10 percent had something very, very peculiar going on" and another 10 percent needed to be looked at, Bennett said.

"The good news is, a majority of them had already seen some kind of eye doctor but some hadn't been for a couple years."

Retina Institute doctors interpret the scans and the results are sent to the patients and their doctors, Bennett said.

Those without a physician are referred to one near their home.

The Project Vision management team includes Dr. J. Shepard Bryan and Debbie Shimabukuro, registered nurse and practice administrator at the Retina Institute.

While people were waiting for the screening exam, she said, "A lot of education was done. We were able to explain how important it is."

Bennett is hoping corporations and others will help support the nonprofit Hawaii Vision Project Foundation as a public service.

Costs the first year, including leasing of the mobile unit and equipment, will total about \$250,000 but they will drop to \$100,000 or \$150,000 once part of the capital cost is paid, he said.

Project Vision is scheduled at a number of events and sites in coming months, such as the Sheraton Hawaii Bowl Dec. 23 at Aloha Stadium. Bennett also plans to take the mobile unit to the neighbor islands on the Superferry.

See [www.retinahawaii.com](http://www.retinahawaii.com) for a calendar of events. To request the mobile unit at an event, school or care home, call 955-0255.