

## MIAMI-DADE COUNTY

# Ex-child actor to make a pitch for eye research

■ A former 'Saved by the Bell' costar will throw out the first pitch at a Marlins game to raise awareness about blindness research.

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Isaac Lidsky grew up a superkid in North Miami Beach.

By the time he was a teenager, the child actor had been cast to play the geek Weasel in the nationally televised teenage sitcom *Saved by the Bell: The New Class*.

At 13, Lidsky learned he was about to start losing his eyesight, which will be put to the test today when he throws out the ceremonial first pitch before the Florida Marlins-Chicago Cubs game at Dolphin Stadium — a pitch to help raise awareness for blindness research.

Lidsky, 28, is a Harvard-trained attorney with the U.S. Department of Justice by day, and the head of Hope for Vision by night.

"I asked myself, 'Why me?' ... or 'Am I unlucky?'" Lidsky remembered. "And the more that I thought about it, the more I realized that in the grand scheme of things, I am profoundly lucky."

According to the National Eye Institute, Florida has the nation's second-largest blind population of people over 40. South Florida may be one of the most afflicted regions for degenerative vision diseases because of the state's aging population, and because

some research has shown it is more common among blacks and Hispanics.

"These diseases are rare, and they're a problem because pharmaceutical companies aren't interested in investing into something that may not be so lucrative," said Dr. Elizabeth Fini, an ophthalmology professor at the University of Miami's Bascom Palmer Institute.

That's one of the reasons why Lidsky's family opened Heart Sight Miami in 1995. Isaac and his three older sisters — Ilana, Daria and Ronit — are the children of Betti and Carlos Lidsky, a lawyer who came from Cuba, and had a recessive gene of retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease.

When Ilana and Daria were diagnosed with the disease, doctors weren't sure about Ronit and Isaac, the two youngest. But during a 10-hour test, a doctor slipped Betti a note: "Mrs. Lidsky, your son has retinitis pigmentosa. I'm really sorry."

"I looked at it as something I would deal with some day later," Isaac Lidsky said.

Lidsky left with his mother to live in Los Angeles and act.

Ambitious and smart, he graduated from Harvard with a bachelor's degree in math and computer science by the time he was 19.

It wasn't until his first year at Harvard Law School, Lidsky said, that his vision went from "nuisance to disability."



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**EYE DISEASE:** Isaac Lidsky, an attorney with the Justice Department, heads the Hope for Vision project.

Then, he met Dorothy Johnston at a party. With her help, Lidsky began using a screen-reading program to communicate with his computer. He also began using a cane.

"I was seeing that the daily things were becoming a frustration for him," Johnston said.

After Lidsky graduated in 2004, he and Johnston wed. And the family's work that began in South Florida has become a national organization with a network of scientists, public officials and business people.

They have raised millions

and have donated \$165,000 to the Bascom Palmer Institute, which opened an Inherited Eye Disease Project.

Lidsky plays the guitar, plays poker — with a bright light behind his shoulders to see his cards with his limited vision — and reads three books per week.

Last weekend, he began preparing — with his wife at a park near their Capitol Hill home in Washington — for his opening pitch in Florida.

"She gives me the ball," Lidsky said, "counts 60 paces, and I wing it in her general direction."