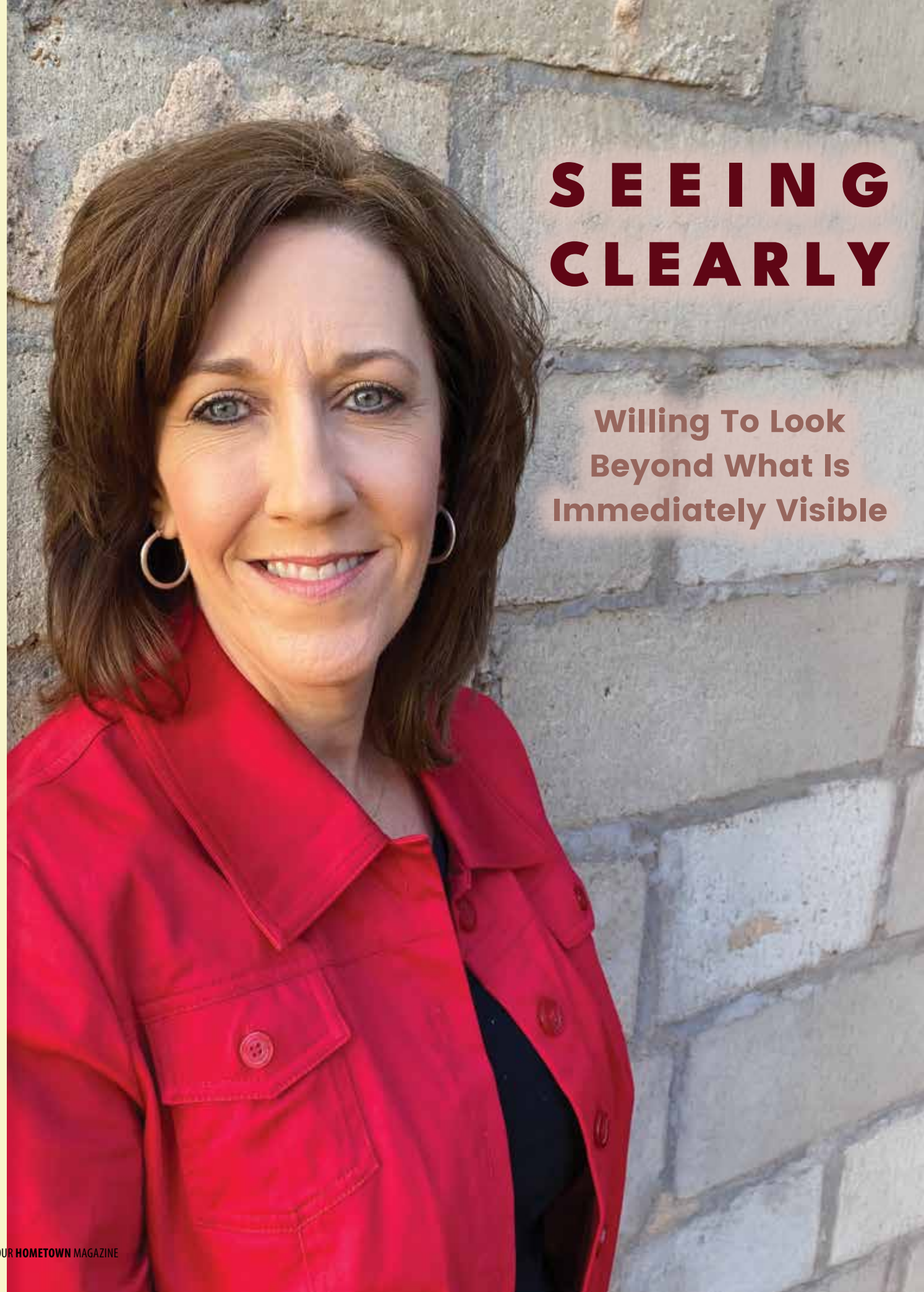


SEEING CLEARLY

Willing To Look Beyond What Is Immediately Visible

How faith, family and an unexpected career change led Dr. Patricia Flippin-Westfall to her calling.



By Christine Faith

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, Dr. Patricia Flippin-Westfall may help a child whose vision problems are interfering with reading, discover a retinal condition threatening an adult's eyesight or care for a longtime patient who has trusted her through decades of changing vision. The ages are different. The needs are different. But the purpose remains the same: to look closely, recognize what others may not see, and make a difference that reaches far beyond the examination room.

For more than two decades, Patricia has cared for patients ranging from infants to great-grandparents. She provides comprehensive eye care for children and adults while also offering specialized vision therapy for patients whose visual systems may not be working efficiently. Sometimes that means helping a student whose difficulty tracking or focusing has affected classroom performance. Sometimes it means helping an adult whose changing vision threatens independence or quality of life. And sometimes it means detecting a serious problem early enough to help preserve a patient's sight.

Her work is about more than helping people see clearly. It is about helping them live, learn and move through the world with greater confidence. The surprising part is that Patricia never planned to become an optometrist. She had earned a degree in accounting and was living in southern Illinois, where her then-husband was attending school. But the job search she expected would begin her career kept coming up empty "I applied for a receptionist position for this chiropractor and didn't get that job, but I got called back for an insurance processor's job," she remembers. What began as a temporary position quickly became something more. Within three or four months, the chiropractor promoted Patricia to office manager, placing her in charge of the practice's finances. She was still working with numbers, but now she was surrounded by patients. That difference caused her to reconsider what she wanted from her career. "That got me into, 'OK, what do I want to do for the rest of my life?'" she says. "Do I want to struggle with trying to find a job as an accountant and not be able to find one, or do I want to make a career move and go back and be like my dad, as an optometrist?"

Her father, Dr. Howard Flippin, had spent his career building an optometry practice in Searcy. Patricia had grown up watching him care for patients, and as she considered her own future, she began to understand the appeal of work centered on people rather than spreadsheets. "I got into helping people, and it's so different than being an accountant and staring at a computer and dealing with numbers all day," she says. "I got to have that interaction with people." When Patricia shared the idea with her parents, their response was immediate. "I said, 'Hey, I'm thinking about going to optometry school. What do you think?' And they were so excited. They were just like, 'We'll help you however we need to.'"

Changing careers meant returning to school and, in many ways, beginning again. Patricia completed several classes in Illinois before deciding to come home to Searcy and enroll at Harding University. She had learned that Harding's demanding coursework was well regarded by optometry schools and believed it would better prepare her for the road ahead. She moved in with her parents while her then-husband remained in Illinois. After completing her prerequisites and being accepted into optometry school, the two reunited in Memphis. Patricia spent the next four years earning her Doctor of Optometry degree from Southern College of Optometry, graduating with honors in the spring of 1999. During those years, her then-husband worked as an airplane mechanic while she completed her education. That July, Patricia returned to Searcy and joined her father's practice. It was the beginning of her own career and the continuation of a family legacy that now represents more than 55 years of optometric care.

Today, Searcy Eye Care & Vision Therapy Center on West Race Avenue carries that legacy forward, but Patricia's path would eventually lead her into an area of care her father could not have anticipated. And the reason was deeply personal. Patricia's oldest son was diagnosed with autism, introducing her to a world of occupational therapy, speech therapy and specialized care. "My oldest son was diagnosed with autism, and that put me in the world of therapies," she says. As she spent time with her son's therapists, Patricia became especially close with an occupational therapist who repeatedly pointed out an unmet need in Arkansas. "We really need somebody to specialize in vision therapy," the therapist told her. The idea stayed with Patricia. Eventually, she realized she might be the person who could meet that need. "I decided to go that direction. It was all because of my son."

Patricia began advanced training in vision therapy in 2009. She continued building her knowledge until she felt prepared to help patients experiencing vision-related learning and functional difficulties. Then she hired a vision therapist and built an entire therapy center from the ground up. Before that program opened in Searcy, many Arkansas families had no nearby place to turn. Some traveled to Memphis or Fort Smith, a trip that could take several hours each way. Patricia remembers an optometrist friend in Cherokee Village whose patients were making the long drive to Memphis for therapy. "When people found out that I was doing vision therapy here, they were so happy that they didn't have to make that drive," she says.

One of the most significant lessons Patricia has learned is that a child's difficulty in the classroom may have more than one possible cause. A child whose visual system is struggling may have trouble tracking words across a page, maintaining focus or

Continued on next page





processing information efficiently. From the outside, those struggles can sometimes resemble an attention problem. "When a child cannot focus on a task because their visual system isn't allowing them to, they get classified as ADHD," Patricia says. "Their tracking, their focusing system, it's not working well, and the information's not getting processed correctly. So what are they to do? They struggle. They're just going to do something else in the classroom."

Because so much classroom learning depends on visual processing, an unrecognized vision problem can affect far more than eyesight. It can influence reading, concentration, confidence and a child's willingness to keep trying. Patricia has seen the difference appropriate care can make, both professionally and personally. Both of her sons needed vision therapy, giving her firsthand experience with the process from a parent's perspective. One of Patricia's closest friends witnessed a similar transformation. After the school referred one of her children to vision therapy, the child's reading improved so dramatically that the mother began recognizing similar symptoms in her other child. "I firsthand saw the difference that made," her friend says. "It was literally incredible. My third child felt "left out" So I had her tested too - but I had learned so much by watching the methods and progress of the first two, I felt like she did not have the same issue. I was right; but what impressed me was how the process of Vision Therapy with Dr. Westfall is so professional yet explained in such simplistic terms, that is what helped me recognize it in my second child but also doubt that my third child had that struggle. I felt very included in the process."

Vision therapy is not a treatment for ADHD or learning disabilities themselves. Its purpose is to identify and address specific visual conditions that may be interfering with a person's ability to read, concentrate or work comfortably. For families who have watched a child struggle without understanding why, discovering that missing piece can be life-changing. As word of Patricia's work spread, families began traveling to Searcy from across the state. Many came from Little Rock and surrounding communities because they had no closer option.

In 2019, Patricia purchased Jacksonville Vision Development Center, establishing a second location and making vision therapy more accessible to families south of Searcy. To Patricia, the opportunity felt like more than a practical business decision. "When the opportunity came with the Jacksonville practice, it was very, very much the Lord leading that," she says. "He just opened that up so I could have a vision therapy center down there and help people in that area." It was not the only time she felt God directing her career. Patricia also helped an optometrist in the Heber Springs area transition into retirement, hired another doctor and helped that young optometrist begin his career. "That was very rewarding," she says. Looking back, she sees those opportunities as parts of a path revealed one step at a time. "I felt like the Lord was Leading me down this path. He led me down vision therapy, and then He opened up the Heber Springs area. Then the Lord said, 'Look, you need to help more people get vision therapy,' and there was a need down in the Little Rock area. So He opened up the Jacksonville practice."

Today, Patricia is a single mother, and outside the office, her life centers on faith and her two sons. She is active in church services on Sundays and Wednesdays, and family time often includes relaxing by a local pool, attending her son's robotics competitions or traveling together. Branson and Silver Dollar City are family favorites, along with Disney World, which Patricia calls her happy place. One especially memorable trip took them to San Antonio, where Patricia attended a professional eye-care seminar and brought her youngest son along. He sat through some of her classes, and it had a profound impact on him. Her son has practically grown up inside the family business. As a baby, he came to the office with his babysitter. He celebrated birthdays there. During the COVID years, he completed three years of homeschooling there. The office was not simply where his mother worked. It was part of the landscape of his childhood.

One day recently, while he was completing an application for his robotics team, he came to Patricia with a question that caught her off guard in the best possible way. "He said, 'Hey, Mom, what classes do I have to take to become an eye doctor?'" she recalls. "That was my first, 'OK, I think he really wants to pursue an eye doctor career.'" Her oldest son inspired the vision therapy center that has helped so many families. Now, her youngest may one day carry the Flippin family's legacy of eye care into another generation.

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When asked what a perfect day looks like in her business, Patricia responds that after more than two decades in practice, Patricia's definition of success remains close to what first drew her away from accounting: the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in someone's life; "A perfect day is everybody getting seen in an appropriate amount of time and everything running smoothly," she says. "But a perfect day is also making a difference in somebody's life, a child coming in who hasn't been able to see, and the parent didn't even realize, and then changing that child's life so they can succeed in the classroom." On another day, making a difference might mean discovering a retinal problem in a patient who came in complaining of floaters and helping that patient receive treatment in time to prevent permanent vision loss.

From infants to great-grandparents, Patricia cares for patients through every stage of life. Her career has also brought significant professional recognition. She has served as president of the Arkansas Optometric Association, received both the Young Optometrist of the Year and Optometrist of the Year awards, and earned board certification from the American Board of Optometry. But when Patricia is asked what inspires her, she does not begin with the awards. She begins with faith. "Being in tune with what the Lord is trying to communicate with me includes being in His Word, hearing what He wants me to do and being obedient to follow that," she says. "That's what really inspires me. Because at the end of the day, He's my world."

What began as an unsuccessful search for an accounting job became a career Patricia never planned and a calling she could not have fully imagined. First, she followed her father into optometry. Then her son led her toward vision therapy. Along the way, patients, families and unexpected opportunities continued showing her where she was needed next. Perhaps that is the clearest picture of Patricia's life and work: a woman willing to look beyond what is immediately visible, listen for God's direction and take the next step when the path comes into focus. Dr. Patricia Flippin-Westfall practices at Searcy Eye Care & Vision Therapy Center in Searcy and Jacksonville Vision Development Center in Jacksonville.

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