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Blind Babies Foundation still thriving

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By Cheryl Jennings

OAKLAND, CA (KGO) -- There is an agency in the Bay Area that's been helping families with blind babies for 60 years. Here are some of the people whose lives have been changed dramatically, thanks to the Blind Babies Foundation of Oakland.

Jim Gammon plays trumpet for the hot house vintage jazz band, when they perform, now and then, around the Bay Area. The music that's so sweet to our ears, is being played by a man who's been blind from birth.

"To be a trumpet player means you got to practice every day," said Gammon.

Jim's day job is at UC Berkeley, where he is a specialist for the blind and visually impaired disabled students' program.

"It's a Braille keyboard, with an audio component," said Gammon.

He is a huge success by any measure, as a husband, father, businessman and musician. He has a master's degree in special education, all because his family got help for him from the Blind Babies foundation when he was just 7-months-old.

That's right after the foundation started 60 years ago.

"In general, society approaches people with, especially blindness by thinking you couldn't do that, there's no way you could do that as a blind person," said Gammon.

But Jim's parents got some life-changing advice from the Blind Babies Foundation, which sent an in-home counselor.

"You don't have to abandon your dreams for your child, what you have to do is alter them to meet the needs of your child," said Gammon.

Jeri Hart is a vision impairment specialist with the Blind Babies Foundation. She's been working with 3-and-half-year old Tyler and his family since Tyler was a week old.

"He's doing so well, it's been so exciting to see how far he's gone," said Hart.

Tyler has very low vision, hearing impairments and multiple disabilities.

Jeri teaches Tyler's mom and dad about things most of us take for granted, if we have sight. She says 80 percent of learning takes place in the early years.

"And if you don't have vision, if a baby doesn't have vision, they're not seeing all those everyday things that you do," said parent Elizabeth Brogna.

"A baby won't reach for you when they hear you, they get quiet and they get still, because they're listening for you, so they reach with their ears, not with their hands, until you teach them to reach up," said Blind Babies Foundation Board President Dottie Bridge.

Bridge says it serves more than 500 children every year in the Bay Area like Tyler. It's helped thousands of families in its 60-year history.

"We're able to see families monthly, weekly, bi-weekly, depending on the need of the family," said Bridge.

"It's very important that babies who have a visual impairment are referred as early as possible for services," said Jeri Hart.

"She had wonderful suggestions, ideas, showed us things to do with Tyler, even showed us how to interact with taylor," said Brogna.

That includes verbalizing everything they do, every step, slowly, over and over again, with reinforcements from signs that label everything in the house.

"When you're parents who come home with a child with a disability, you don't know what to do, how to hold your child. Oh my gosh, your head is reeling and your heart is breaking," said Brogna.

"There were still all these questions and she came in and just looked at him as this beautiful little baby," said

Tyler's 13-month-old brother, Alexander, has full vision and no disabilities. Tyler's now advanced to the point where the two boys fight over toys just like any other kids.

Specialists like Jeri become a close part of these families and their work makes an enormous difference in helping blind children reach their full potential, just like Jim.

"If you're allowed to grow up unencumbered by people's attitudes of what you can't do, then you can do whatever you want to do," said Gammon.

The Blind Babies Foundation is holding its 60th Anniversary Gala Saturday, February 7th, at the Westin St. Francis in San Francisco. Cheryl Jennings is the emcee.