

World coming into focus for cataract patient

Dr. James Gills, left, does cataract surgery on Anthony VanPraet's right eye Wednesday at St. Luke's Cataract & Laser Institute in Tarpon Springs.



TARPON SPRINGS - Early on the morning of Anthony VanPraet's eye surgery, Dr. James P. Gills rode to his clinic, as usual, on his bicycle.

VanPraet, 54, arrived in a car driven by a friend.

Wednesday was a big day, and not just for VanPraet.

Gills was one of 100 surgeons nationwide who operated on 100 low-income people in 100 minutes. The goal: to implant crystalens intraocular lenses - the Mercedes-Benz of lenses, Gills said - in their eyes.

VanPraet, who was homeless up until a month ago, was one of those patients.

He had to be driven to St. Luke's Cataract and Laser Institute because cataracts had clouded his vision so much that he has been legally blind for about 2 years.

The cars on the road looked like nothing more than a blur to him.

The procedure started with a prayer led by a nurse.

The lenses, made by Bausch & Lomb, cost \$2,500 each. They're designed to correct what happens to our eyes as we age.

Early in life, the natural lens of the eye changes shape to focus on objects at varying distances. As we grow older, the lens hardens and loses its ability to change focus from far to near, and reading glasses or bifocals are required.

With cataract surgery, the natural lens is removed and a prosthetic lens is implanted. The crystalens uses the eye's natural focusing muscles and system to flex and accommodate like the natural lens, so the patient can again focus on objects at distances near, far and in between.

"It's one of the greatest advancements in cataract surgery in the last 50 years," Gills said.



Pre-operative nurse Julia Miner, left, prays with patient Anthony VanPraet before Dr. James Gills replaces the lens in VanPraet's right eye Wednesday with a prosthetic lens at St. Luke's Cataract & Laser Institute in Tarpon Springs. Gills was one of 100 doctors nationwide implanting lenses in 100 patients of modest means.

According to Gills, about 14-million people have cataract surgery each year worldwide.

On Wednesday morning, VanPraet, an out-of-work painter, was one of them - only he got a superior lens.

He's had a difficult few years.

VanPraet owned a paint store in Ybor City, but now that's gone, said George Armstrong, the friend who gave him the ride.

He is married to Karol VanPraet. When the couple became homeless, she went to live with relatives.

VanPraet went to the Holy Ground Homeless Shelter at Denton Avenue and U.S. 19 in Hudson.

While Karol VanPraet worked at McDonald's, he couldn't even get a permanent job sweeping the floor because of his poor vision.

The couple was able to rent a loft in a Spring Hill house about a month ago.

Since then, VanPraet has been eager to return to work.

"It's driving him crazy that his wife works at McDonald's and can barely pay the rent," Armstrong said.

The Florida Division of Blind Services was going to help him get the operation when the opportunity came from Bausch & Lomb for VanPraet to be one of 100 surgical patients in 100 minutes Wednesday.

In the first surgery, Gills implanted the lens and corrected astigmatism in VanPraet's right eye.

The left eye will be done in about three weeks, according to Gills.

"He has a 50-50 chance of never needing glasses," said Gills.

After the 20-minute operation, VanPraet was amazed that he could see after two years of feeling walls to get around.

While still on the operating table, he embraced Gills before getting to his feet.

"I can see perfect," VanPraet said. "I'm going to read all the signs on the way home."