

# Orlando Sentinel

## Orlando Sentinel *Dining in darkness to shed light on those in need*

By James Tutten, Contact Reporter  
July 17, 2015

Venturing into a world of complete darkness is one way to shed light on those struggling with blindness.

"If you have a child who is blind, or you yourself are blind, you feel very alone," said Kyle Johnson, director of sustainability and communications for Lighthouse Central Florida. "You're lost and you're in the dark."

Dining in the Dark, a charity event organized by Lighthouse Central Florida and Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, presented guests with a unique experience Thursday evening, to sit down for a meal in a room completely void of light.

In addition to the unique experience of a sensory-deprivation banquet, guests were served their meal by some of Orlando's finest.

Several members of Orlando SWAT Team were in attendance to protect and serve. Though on this occasion, their job was to protect people from tripping over chairs and serve them a full-course meal.

Officers, equipped with night-vision goggles, led in groups of diners and waited on them throughout the evening. They poured glasses of wine, placed hot plates of food down and picked them back up when empty, and assisted guests to find their way to the restroom when nature called.

"It feels good, it's fun to interact with the public in a positive manner, because we're always getting called on people's worst day," said Christopher Bigelow, an officer with OPD for nearly eight years and a SWAT Team member for two years.

Dining in the Dark guests were served a gluten-free meal consisting of goat cheese ravioli with a roasted garlic puree, a fried green tomato stuffed with crab meat and a citrus vinaigrette, seared duck breast with a mushroom and sundried tomato risotto, a vegetarian option consisting of roasted eggplant patties, and a dessert of brie cheesecake with a tomato and cherry jam.

Light was slowly introduced into the dining room by small light-emitting cubes, served with the rich dessert given as the final course.

This event not only allowed SWAT Team members to talk with the public in a relaxed setting, it also gave them practical training experience with the night-vision technology as they performed controlled tasks which required dexterity, like pouring wine into a glass in total darkness without spilling a drop.

Vision is the most powerful tool we use to understand the world around us. Without sight, other senses go into overdrive. Sounds are amplified in your ears as voices echo across the room. Feeling becomes another vital tool, as you carefully reach in front of you for what hopefully is the right utensil in order to eat.

Though our sense of smell makes up most of what we experience as taste, food just doesn't taste the same when you're unsure what you have on your plate.

Shock and amazement could be seen on the faces of the diners in attendance after completing a dining experience, which left some unsure of the menu.

After event organizers made some final remarks near the end of the meal, diners were then encouraged to share their experiences from the evening.

One woman remarked at the feeling as if she had vampire hearing due to her enhanced sensitivity to sound. Another guest shared that she felt some comfort knowing that her blindness wasn't permanent, but then felt empathy for those who can't step out of the darkness because they live with vision loss every day.

Another diner who lives with near total blindness became emotional as he thanked everyone for making the event possible.

