

Lions Gift of Sight

TODAY

DEPARTMENT OF OPHTHALMOLOGY & VISUAL NEUROSCIENCES

*A publication
for our friends
and partners*

FALL 2021



Lions Gift of Sight TODAY

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Thriving on Change

Sean Poppoff, Executive Director

Despite the curves that COVID-19 persists in throwing (and sometimes because of them), Lions Gift of Sight continues to evolve. How many donors will be turned away because of COVID we cannot know. We do know that we absolutely must maximize donations to minimize shortages in the world of eye banking and corneal transplantation.

The new buzz word is “pivot,” which to me means turning on a dime, using nimble thinking to adapt quickly and often. Since March of 2020, I have asked my staff to pivot so many times I am surprised they haven’t developed vertigo! Yet their equilibrium is unshaken, and they continue to deliver. Thank you to my staff for embracing change and making our eye bank continually excel.

Here are some highlights from 2021:

We have added staff in donor coordination and in tissue preparation to meet the needs of additional corneal surgeon customers. Corneal transplant surgeries dipped the first half of 2020, but this aberration has faded. Tissue requests to our eye bank now exceed the level of pre-COVID times, and we needed to respond appropriately. So we welcomed three new donor coordinators, a new distribution coordinator, a new eye bank scientist, and a new research technician. We are on the cusp of hiring a supply and inventory specialist as well.

We have steadily grown our research program. Worldwide, research tissue is in short supply and valued above rubies or pearls! As mentioned above, we increased our always-amazing research team, and we’re adding new research clients. We are supporting the Diabetes Endothelial Keratoplasty Study (DEKS), a 5-year study led by Case Western Reserve that seeks to determine which diabetic individuals can successfully donate corneas for transplant. The number of persons stricken with diabetes is on the rise in this country, so the number of eye donors with diabetes is also on the rise. What is the impact of diabetes on corneal transplant success and endothelial cell loss? It is important to find out, and our eye bank is proud to contribute to this important study.

We launched a new inventory management system. A full-service eye bank works with highly-regulated supplies in its undertaking to recover, process, and distribute eye tissue. Since much of our tissue is destined for transplantation into another human being, we must know exactly which supplies played a role in every eye tissue’s journey from donor to recipient. We must be able to produce this information in the event of an audit, an FDA recall, or a surgery center inquiry. The new inventory system will assist with this need. It will also help us track the life cycle of supplies from order to arrival and consumption, help us reduce waste, and monitor the servicing and maintenance of our equipment.

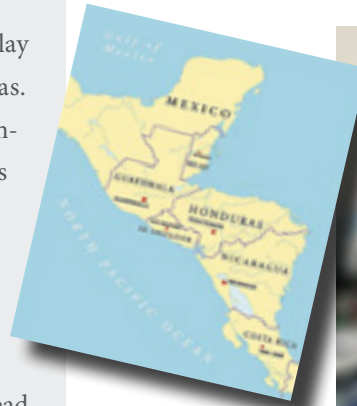
Eye Banks Work Together to Restore Sight

Lions Gift of Sight was recently given an opportunity to play a role in a medical mission trip to assist the people of Honduras. As an eye bank that is affiliated with Lions Clubs International, an association that helps local communities and provides humanitarian aid across the world, our eye bank was happy to participate by donating corneas for sight-saving surgeries.

The Republic of Honduras is a Central American country with its share of difficulties, healthcare among them. Civilians face crime, conflict, sexual violence, and widespread dengue fever. Many have very limited access to essential healthcare. In the past, International Health Care, based in Minnesota, and Medecins Sans Frontiers / Doctors Without Borders have organized mission trips to help the people of Honduras.

This year, a mission trip was coordinated by Dr. Mark Hansen (corneal specialist) and Dr. Goerlitz-Jessen (corneal fellow) from Minnesota Eye Consultants. They contacted Lions Gift of Sight and asked if we could secure a number of gratis (no-fee)

corneas for their Honduras mission, since Honduras has no eye bank of its own and must rely on donations from other countries. Our distribution team duly



A surgical technician holds one of the precious corneas donated for the Honduras mission trip.



reached out to eye banks in Oregon, Virginia, and New York and secured 14 corneas for transplants to treat glaucoma, corneal ulcers, and problems after cataract surgery. We arranged for other eye banks to ship directly to Dr. Goerlitz-Jessen's house, and our distribution manager, Natalie Buckman, personally delivered eight of our own corneas before the team's departure the Sunday before Memorial Day.

**Thanks to this collaborative effort,
18 people received transplants!**

Providing medical care in Honduras has its challenges. Record keeping is almost nonexistent. There are no charts with the addresses, dates of birth, or medical conditions of patients. Names (when available) are just written on a whiteboard. Follow-up visits for patients are difficult and, therefore, rare. All of which makes the 18 transplants that were performed a minor miracle.

We salute Drs. Hansen and Goerlitz-Jessen and all healthcare personnel who perform missions to restore sight in areas where there are few resources and limited access to eye care. Lions Gift of Sight is proud to contribute to their humanitarian efforts.

Honduras ophthalmology mission team. Dr. Hansen is kneeling front center, and Dr. Goerlitz-Jessen is standing second from left.



EBAA

**SAFETY FIRST.
INNOVATION ALWAYS.**



is



Lions Gift of Sight is an Eye Bank Association of America-accredited eye bank, and we are ever appreciative of all that the association does to advance the field and craft of eye banking.

One amazing resource the EBAA offers is their annual meeting. This invaluable gathering space (lately virtual) for eye banking professionals offers a wealth of opportunities and

information to attendees, including technical skills workshops, sessions on all aspects of eye banking from tissue recovery through aftercare for families, a scientific symposium, the presentation of phenomenal papers, and much more.

Lions Gift of Sight is honored to sponsor the Best Paper of Session Award at the upcoming November 2021 meeting. The prestigious

award is supported by an unrestricted educational grant from the *International Journal of Eye Banking* (founded by Lions Gift of Sight and now published by the EBAA). The 2021 winner is a former University of Minnesota fellow, Dr. Sana Qureshi with her paper *Safety of Eye Bank Prepared Pre-stripped, Pre-stained, Pre-loaded Descemet's Membrane Endothelial Keratoplasty (p3DMEK)*.

Partnering with Funeral Directors to Serve Families

For many years after the founding of Minnesota Lions Eye Bank / Lions Gift of Sight in 1960, donations still occurred predominantly in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul Metro Area. Eye donation opportunities for deceased persons in greater Minnesota were severely limited, and this didn't seem right for a state eye bank.

To remedy the geographic limitations and bring eye donation services to the entire state, legislation was passed authorizing specially-trained morticians to remove eyes, thus increasing the supply potential. And to support this 1974 legislation, the eye bank developed a training program to teach funeral directors enucleation (the removal of eyes for eye banking purposes). Minnesota funeral directors did not disappoint but generously and enthusiastically embraced their new role. They became increasingly active in supplying donor eye tissue to the eye bank, and, indeed, were the cornerstone of eye recovery in greater Minnesota for 30 years!

The efforts of funeral directors resulted in more than 10,000 enucleated eyes and thousands of corneal transplants.

While eye and cornea recovery has become progressively more complex and is now solely in the hands of eye bank staff members, Lions Gift of Sight

remains indebted to funeral directors and morticians for their past service and for the care they provide to the families of eye donors.

With funeral directors, we share the commitment to honor donation wishes of deceased persons. Out of respect for this valued partnership, Lions Gift of Sight continuously seeks ways to minimize the impact that eye donation has on the work of morticians and to increase our understanding of the challenges facing the profession. To that end, in March, we welcomed Giselle Wynia to the Partner & Community Relations team. Giselle works with hospitals and other donation referral sources, but she was also hired to strengthen our funeral service outreach.

Giselle earned her mortician license in 2008 and joined the University of Minnesota in 2016 as an academic advisor for the Program of Mortuary Science. She also taught embalming, restorative arts, and human anatomy and was the course coordinator for the Anatomy Bequest Program. Giselle is an invaluable addition to the eye bank team and joins five other employees with a background in mortuary science: donor coordinators Laura Kalk, Jen Kastner, Kari Obbink, and Kristen Piring, and eye bank scientist Chris LaGassie.

Lions Gift of Sight exhibited at the Minnesota Funeral

Honoring Donors and Their Families

Helping to restore sight is an amazing legacy for any person to leave.

Each year, Lions Gift of Sight hosts a program to commemorate the legacy that is eye donation. We honor donors who have given sight by contributing to the knowledge of research scientists studying diseases like macular degeneration, diabetic retinopathy, and glaucoma. We honor donors who have given sight by adding to the knowledge and skills of the next generation of eye doctors. And we honor donors who have given sight to a specific

person through a corneal transplant. Collectively, these donors have helped countless individuals to see.

On May 23 we held a virtual recognition event paying tribute to donors from 2019 and 2020. The program featured a University of Minnesota doctor and a research scientist, a story and thank you from a corneal recipient, and, most precious of all, a slide show of donor pictures.

Please visit our website for a link to this beautiful program:

<https://LionsGiftofSght.umn.edu/Recognition-Program>.

Directors Association convention in August. They heard from many funeral directors who proudly shared stories of their time as enucleators, each knowing precisely how many gifts of sight they had recovered. Patty and Giselle (remotely) presented a one-hour education session following a touching Service of Remembrance, which LGS was pleased to sponsor. Honored were Minnesota funeral directors who have passed away in the past two years.

It takes a village to restore sight and advance ophthalmology through eye donation. Funeral directors, many of whom are Lions, are invaluable members of that village. We thank them for their service.



The above photos represent but a small sampling of the memorable pictures sent to us by the families and friends of donors from the years 2019 and 2020. To see many more, view our Recognition Program using the link above.

“Service to others is the rent we pay for the space we occupy here on earth.”

— President Douglas X. Alexander
Lions Clubs International

Service from the Heart

The International Association of Lions Clubs firmly believes in developing the leadership skills of its members. While not all Lions occupy professional management roles, through Lion Clubs International, they have ample opportunities to become leaders or to become better leaders.

To give all a chance to shine, many leadership positions on the club, district, and international level are for only one or two years. And this is true for the highest position in the association: International President.

The shepherd of the 2021-2022 Lions year is Douglas X. Alexander, a Lion hailing from Brooklyn, New York. His theme for the year is “Service from the Heart,” an apt choice since President Alexander has a heart twice the size of the average Lion and three times the size of the citizen on the street. Lion Douglas has maintained that “Service to others is the rent we pay for the space we occupy here on Earth.” In other words, if we are well and if we are well off, then we have an obligation to see that others are well and well off, too. Service, the essence of Lionism, is an obligation, as well as a privilege and a joy.

President Alexander recently queried, “Are we living who we say we are?” Lions. Eye bankers. Individuals. Each one of us would benefit from asking ourselves this question. Are we providing service or just lip service? We trust our answers will do us credit.

Eye Donation Month

For those in the eye banking profession, each day presents the prospect of hope from loss. This state of equilibrium between grief and gratitude is always present in the work of our donation coordinators, eye tissue recovery technicians, family support staff, and laboratory personnel. It is always remembered by our partner relations, quality systems, communications, and eye bank support service staff.

But when November arrives, we set aside time to just celebrate our work with Eye Donation Month.

We ask you to join us in raising awareness of the great gift that is eye donation and the work of eye banks to transform that gift into renewed hope and restored sight.

Happy Eye Donation Month!



LIONS GIFT OF SIGHT (LGS) is a community-based non-profit eye bank. Founded in 1960, it is the oldest donation organization in Minnesota. LGS serves the needs of donors and recipients in Minnesota, western Wisconsin, and North Dakota, as well as Galveston, Texas, 24 hours-a-day, 365 days-a-year. LGS distributes corneas for transplant and eyes and corneas for research and medical education.

With a stringent eye bank quality assurance program that audits all aspects of operations, LGS upholds the highest tissue quality standards. LGS is accredited by the Eye Bank Association of America, inspected by the Food and Drug Administration, and follows OSHA and University of Minnesota Office of the Vice President for Research guidelines. LGS is a proud part of the Minnesota Lions Vision Foundation, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Mayo Creates Donation Tribute

Early in 2021, Mayo Clinic unveiled the newly constructed Gift of Life wall. Located just inside the main entrance of the Mary Brigh Building on the Saint Marys Campus of Mayo Clinic Hospital in Rochester. The installation recognizes all organ, blood, eye, tissue, and whole-body donors. The Gift of Life Wall is a place of hope and healing and a testament to Mayo's support of transplant medicine.

Designed and constructed by Mayo staff, the tribute was many years and many minds in the making. Lions Gift of Sight was honored to be included in the work group that brought the project to fruition. The timeless design is an elegant work of beauty with messaging that embodies Mayo Clinic values. And, in fact, the Mayo Clinic Values Council honored project and donation committee member Mollie Luhman with the prestigious Karis Award, in part, for her work on this project. The award formally recognizes caring persons who consistently live out the Mayo Clinic values in an extraordinary way, as they serve patients, visitors, and colleagues.

Honoring the Gift of Life

In the Mayo Clinic mission of providing hope and healing to our patients, we honor people who give of themselves to serve others through selfless acts of donation.

Organ, blood, eye and tissue donations provide new life to their recipients. Anatomical donations advance the training of highly skilled, compassionate health care professionals.

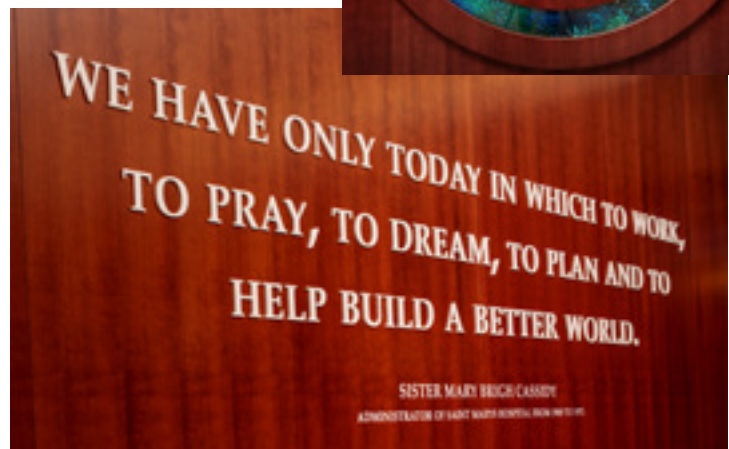
With the generous spirit of these donors,
every life has a new beginning.

Sister Mary Brigh Cassidy, administrator of Saint Marys Hospital from 1946 to 1971 is quoted in the installation. The quote reads, "We have only today in which to work, to pray, to dream, to plan and to help build a better world."

Watch the beautiful *Walk of Remembrance* video (link address below) that was crafted to honor donors and to unveil this incredible new tribute wall. Featured in the video are Steve and Jackie Rasmusson, parents of eye donor Tim Rasmusson. Steve served as construction manager for the project.

Walk of Remembrance video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H1bAE4S81yI>



Park Nicollet Methodist Considers Donation Best Practices in Remodel

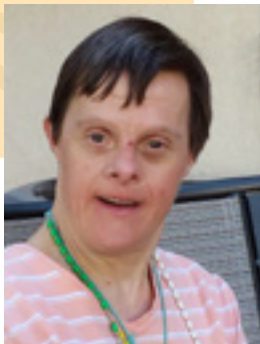
Lions Gift of Sight recovery technicians perform eye recoveries in funeral homes, medical examiner spaces, various hospital locations, and wherever time, place, and regulations allow. Some sites are the Ritz of recovery settings and some are, well, very much not. So it was with deep gratitude that our eye bank greeted Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital's invitation to share eye and cornea recovery best practices with them before they remodeled their hospital morgue.

LGS joined in conversations regarding the morgue remodel

starting in late 2020, and, throughout the project, suggestions for improved eye donation usability were met with respect and accommodation. The new and improved morgue is now finished, and we at Lions Gift of Sight could not be more pleased. Staff who have used the new room to recover eye tissue from Park Nicollet Methodist donors report that the space considerably eases their work.

On behalf of donors and their families, we salute Park Nicollet Methodist Hospital for their support of donation!

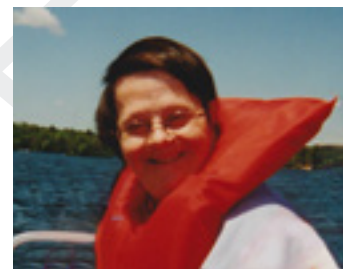
Donor Spotlight: Mary Beth



Mary Beth was warm, generous, and loved to laugh. With a kind personality and a wicked sense of humor, she was a welcome addition on field trips to the Children’s Theatre, a visit to a coffee shop, an excursion to Little House on the Prairie sites, or trips to the lake. Mary Beth loved music and could be found singing to John Denver or Peter, Paul, and Mary any time. She had a prodigious memory and would ask you about children, parents, friends, or pets that you had mentioned just in passing. She was a kind and loving presence in her roommate Anne’s life for more than 40 years.

From a young age, Mary Beth battled retinitis pigmentosa, an inherited degenerative eye disease that decreases a person’s peripheral vision. As she aged, seeing became increasingly difficult, and Mary Beth had to rely on caregivers to help her navigate. But her optimism was constant, and she remained a positive influence on others, including Mary Beth! You could frequently hear her murmuring encouraging words to herself like, “Good job, M.B.”

Mary Beth volunteered for the eye bank, and gave us more than 80 hours of her time. Because she believed in our work and because of her own vision problems, Mary Beth made the decision to donate her eyes to research when she died, her last and greatest gift to Lions Gift of Sight. Mary Beth’s eyes found a home with a University of Iowa researcher studying rare human retinal diseases, including retinitis pigmentosa. One day this research could lead to better treatments or a cure for patients like Mary Beth. Very good job, indeed, M.B.!



Recipient Spotlight: Lalita

As a **teacher** and professor of education at St. Cloud State University, Lalita’s life involved volumes of reading and countless work hours on the computer. So it was extremely unsettling for Lalita to realize that her vision was steadily failing.

“I had difficulty distinguishing surfaces that were the same color but at different levels or of different shapes. For example, I could not tell where the street ended and the sidewalk began when both were white and covered with snow.”

As it turned out, Lalita had Fuchs’ dystrophy, an eye disease that affects the delicate inner layers of the cornea. Lalita’s corneal cells began to die, causing swelling. Her vision became distorted, and everything began to look murky. Fuchs’ dystrophy is a progressive disease, and as it worsens painful blisters can form on the eye’s surface.

Fortunately for Lalita, a corneal transplant could save her vision. She received donor corneas through Lions Gift of Sight, first for her right eye and then for her left. Lalita reports that her eyesight is back to what it used to be, and along with that comes restored confidence.

To her cornea donors’ families Lalita says, “I thank you for sharing with me your beloved family member. I sincerely hope that the story of my recovery helps you heal during what is undoubtedly a time of great sorrow. I am eternally grateful.”

