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Sweet Success

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We take so much in life, like our eyesight, for granted, until we realize we are losing it. In this issue, read about three brothers who struggled with the same eye condition, causing them to gradually lose their eyesight until one of them sought the advice of a physician and set all three on an inspiring journey to restored sight.

This amazing gift – the gift of sight – is only possible through the generosity of others, like Kristi Burk, who gave their corneas, tissues and/or organs to help others when they no longer needed them. Kristi’s story is also included in this issue.

In New Jersey, only 32 percent of licensed drivers and identification card holders have designated themselves as donors, yet there are nearly 5,000 people on the waiting list for transplants in our state alone. We need your help to let others know about the importance of signing up on the Donate Life New Jersey Registry. We also need your financial support to continue making tissue available, especially for those who are unable to afford it, for research into the causes of eye diseases and to educate others about the importance of eye, organ and tissue donation.

Our work continues as we welcome our new laboratory manager, Tracy Moore, and staff members Joshua Wilson and Marlene Munoz. We’re also pleased to welcome returning Board member Rick Chittum back to our Board of Directors. We’re fortunate to have people who are so devoted to our mission of sight preservation and restoration, from those we work with on a daily basis to our supporters, like you.

Let’s work together to keep making miracles happen.

Margaret Greenaway Chaplin
Executive Director
On the day he met Kristi, the woman who would become his wife, John Burk thought he was meeting up with a friend to discuss business over lunch when he headed to a local restaurant.

But his friend didn’t show for their meeting, so John struck up a conversation with the brown-eyed bartender. One thing led to another, and he asked her out. For their first date, they went to a Jimmy Buffet concert. It was the start of a relationship that would span two decades.

Together, John and Kristi had a good life, which included their daughter, Sharon. While Sharon was young, Kristi worked as a lunch aide at her school, a job that combined Kristi’s background in the food service industry with the ability to be near her daughter. Later, when Sharon was older, Kristi became a waitress.

John, a mechanical engineer, traveled frequently for work. Sometimes, Kristi would be able to join him, usually at the beginning or end of a trip. Together, they were able to see the world, visiting places like Hong Kong, Korea and Bulgaria.

There were challenges, too, like when Kristi was diagnosed with breast cancer, which she beat not once, but twice. Through it all, though, she remained the active, fun-loving woman with whom John had fallen in love.

But on Christmas Day of 2010, tragedy struck.

John, Kristi and Sharon were celebrating the holiday with Kristi’s family when Kristi went into cardiac arrest. She passed away just weeks before her and John’s 20th anniversary. John realizes how heartbreaking it sounds, to lose a wife and mother on Christmas, but really, he says, he found comfort in the fact that the whole family was together.

His sister-in-law insisted on driving him and Sharon home; it was during that drive that a call came from the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey, asking for John’s consent to donate Kristi’s corneas.

Although John had heard of the Eye Bank before and even had some friends who had been donors, he didn’t know much about cornea donation itself. He and Kristi had talked about organ donation, though, so he knew that she was in favor of it, and that she had signed up on the Donor Registry when she renewed her driver’s license. He told the caller yes, Kristi could be an eye donor.

In order to determine whether somebody is eligible to donate, the Eye Bank must ask a number of questions pertaining to the person’s medical and social history. The questions are very personal in nature, and donor families sometimes find them difficult to answer. For John, the interviewer’s sensitivity made a huge difference.

“The interviewer could not have been better,” he recalls. “For me, that made it a little bit easier.”

After Kristi’s donation, John received a letter from the Eye Bank, letting him know that her corneas had helped give somebody a second chance for sight. Receiving this news cemented in his mind that he had made the right decision.

“It was so fulfilling,” John says. “It made us feel so good that we were able to help someone keep their sight or get it back.”
Dennis Moore had struggled with his vision since shortly after he finished college, but it wasn’t until years later, when he was driving with his wife and kept missing exits on the highway, that he finally decided to do something about it.

His wife suggested he might need eyeglasses, so Dennis set up an appointment with an optometrist. At the appointment, however, the optometrist quickly realized that glasses couldn’t solve Dennis’ eye trouble. The real problem was keratoconus, a degenerative eye condition that causes the cornea to change shape and bulge outward, resulting in increasingly blurry vision.

Dennis went to an ophthalmologist, and began treatment with rigid, gas-permeable contact lenses that help to push the cornea back into its proper shape. They weren’t particularly comfortable, but they did help improve his vision.

Meanwhile, two of Dennis’ three brothers were very interested in the new information he had about his eyesight. For years, Tommy and Jeffrey had experienced the same symptoms as Dennis, but hadn’t realized it was the result of a medical condition. They, too, decided to see an ophthalmologist, and were soon diagnosed with keratoconus as well. Interestingly, despite its high rate of occurrence in the Moore family, keratoconus is not considered to be a hereditary disease.

As their conditions progressed, the Moore brothers found themselves less satisfied with the gas permeable contact lenses. In addition to being
uncomfortable, they were very expensive. Because the brothers’ insurance company classified them as being the same as traditional contact lenses used in place of glasses, each pair carried an out-of-pocket cost of $300, according to Dennis.

“That was my hugest frustration,” he says.

Finally, one by one, the brothers turned to cornea transplants – first Jeffrey, followed by Tommy, then Dennis.

“When I couldn’t take it anymore with the contact lenses,” explains Dennis, he knew it was time for a transplant.

Eventually, all three of them received transplants in both eyes.

Their doctors, Dennis says, were a wonderful source of support for him and his brothers, but their greatest source of support came from each other, as they went through everything together.

Dennis reports that within weeks of both of his transplants, he was able to see clearly. The procedure itself, he says, was quick, and he didn’t really experience any pain, adding, “The biggest pain was having to wear an eye patch at night.”

Today, thanks to their transplants, Dennis, Tommy and Jeffrey are doing well, working together at their family business, Little Jimmy’s Italian Ice, which was started by their grandfather more than 60 years ago. Dennis and Tommy even expressed their gratitude for the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey by sharing their story in a Public Service Announcement (PSA) about the Eye Bank.

To view the PSA, visit the “Videos” page of the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey website, www.LEBNJ.org.

For more than 50 years, Little Jimmy’s Italian Ice has been a summertime favorite for people throughout New Jersey and beyond.

The recipe for the handmade Italian water ice, which boasts the consistency of sherbet without any kind of dairy or nondairy creamer, is virtually the same as it was 75 years ago, when Dennis, Tommy and Jeffrey Moore’s grandfather made his first batch for sale to the people of Elizabeth and Linden, New Jersey.

While the company has grown, the product remains as cool and refreshing as always. And thanks to their restored eyesight, Dennis, Tommy and Jeffrey can ensure it always will.

To learn more about Little Jimmy’s Italian Ice, visit www.italianice.net.
Dear Family of the Donor,

My wife and I want you to know what a difference your remarkable gift meant for us. Our son’s right eye was severely damaged in an accident, when another boy threw a pencil in the dark, lacerating his eye. He spent a week in the hospital, had his lens removed, much of the vitreous of the eye taken out, and had the cornea stitched eight times, right down the middle.

It was traumatic for all of us, including his older and younger brothers. For his mother and me, it was a shock, as our son had better than normal vision in both eyes, and is a fine athlete. Most importantly, he is an excellent student. Smart and motivated.

The positive of the injury is that he became much more serious about his studies, realizing that this is the path to success. Nonetheless, he continued to excel in baseball, remaining competitive in spite of his eye issue.

Even after receiving a new lens in his right eye, his vision was compromised by the repaired cornea, so it was recommended that he have a transplant. Thus, where we are now!

All indications are that the transplant was a huge success. Our son, with urging, is diligent about the regimen of drops necessary to help the cornea graft. He is preparing for the coming high school baseball season, and has recently taken the ACT in preparation for college and perhaps before that, spending two years at a math and science institute.

He is a great kid, a good person and, like us, very thankful for his restored vision. We know that our son’s sight came at a dear price to you, so we can only hope that you can find comfort in knowing that your loved one lives on in the eye of a really fine young man. While he has much life to live, the trajectory looks to be one that will make us all proud!

With utmost appreciation,

Parents of the recipient

Dear Donor Family,

I would like to express my thanks for my eyesight. I am 15, and a sophomore in high school in Kansas. I am an avid baseball player, and have been for as long as I can remember. This year, after my first eye injury, I struggled. I am looking forward to a more successful year with my regained vision. My original eye injury occurred from a pencil being thrown into my eye. I had a scar down the middle of my cornea that distorted my vision. It has been two years since the original injury, and I am finally on the road to a permanent recovery thanks to you.

Sincerely,

The Patient
Writing your own letter

While confidentiality rules prevent donor families and recipients from corresponding directly with one another, the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey is happy to act as an intermediary between the two parties, should they wish to communicate. To protect the privacy of both parties, we forward letters and cards anonymously, unless each party has signed a confidentiality waiver that allows their identities to be shared.

Any time is a good time to write. Whether it has been weeks or months since your transplant, donor families often appreciate hearing from those who have benefited from their loved one's gift.

Occasionally, donor family members will send a note or card in response to your correspondence. Others may choose not to write you at this time. Don't feel discouraged if you don't receive a response.

Place your card or letter in an unsealed envelope. Include a separate note to the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey, requesting your correspondence be mailed to the donor family. We will need your full name, phone number and date of surgery.

If you have any questions about the correspondence process, contact Cathy Wasner at 732-382-3060, ext. 7278.

When you write:
- Use only first names. Tell them something special or unique about yourself.
- Write about your need for a transplant and how the experience has affected your life.
- Mention ways the donor’s gift has made a difference in your life.
- Consider thanking your donor family.
- Be sensitive regarding religious comments and views, since the donor family’s religion is unknown.
- Please sign only your first name. Do not use last names, street addresses, city names, phone numbers or names of hospitals or physicians.

Mail both pieces in one envelope to:
Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey
77 Brant Avenue, Suite 100
Clark, New Jersey 07066

Donor Tribute Website offers space to remember loved ones

There are no greater gifts in this world than the gifts of sight, life and mobility. The Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey is committed to supporting donor families who have made the generous decision to donate.

That commitment is what led the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey, as part of Midwest Eye-Banks, to create its Donor Tribute Website. The site features virtual memorials honoring those who wanted to help others by becoming eye, organ and tissue donors upon their passing.

Tributes are written by family and friends of those who have donated, as well as by transplant recipients who wish to say thanks to their donor and their donor's family for making such a precious gift possible.

Each one is unique, and they take all kinds of written form, from letters to poetry. Some also feature photos, which may be uploaded along with the text.

“We honor the person and his or her wish to help others through donation,” says Margaret Chaplin, Executive Director of the Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey.

“In addition to the many eye, organ and tissue donors who have been memorialized, this site includes tributes to people whose donations could not be carried out, but who were committed to helping others through donation nonetheless.”

The Donor Tribute site is a free resource; there is no charge to create a tribute.

The Eye Bank hopes that giving people a place to honor and remember their loved ones may provide some relief during difficult times of grief and loss.

If you would like to add a tribute, visit www.LEBNJ.org, and click the “Donor Tribute” button on the bottom-right column of the page. Donor Tribute site visitors are also encouraged to read the tributes submitted by others to learn more about our amazing donors.

For additional information and other resources available to donor families and cornea recipients, click on the “Communities” tab on our homepage.
Save the Date!

Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey

Night for Sight

Honoring

Dr. William Constad

November 15, 2012

at Mayfair Farms in West Orange

Tickets are $125 each

For more information or to reserve a ticket, call 800-653-9379.

The Lions Eye Bank of New Jersey will celebrate its second Night for Sight fundraiser, an event that brings together the business and medical communities, ophthalmologists and friends of the Eye Bank to celebrate and honor those who help make the gift of sight possible. During the evening, guests will also learn more about the Eye Bank’s mission to preserve and restore sight.

At the event on November 15, 2012, William Constad, M.D., will be honored as a Man of Vision for his work on behalf of the Eye Bank. Dr. Constad is a renowned ophthalmologist serving the people of New Jersey. He is an active member of the Eye Bank’s Board of Directors and also serves as Medical Director.

“His efforts are instrumental to our organization,” explains Margaret Chaplin, the Eye Bank’s Executive Director. “He’s a highly skilled physician, but what’s more, he’s a great person. We’re very glad to have the opportunity to honor him in this way.”