



OUR STORY

75 years ago...

A \$5,000 Lions donation...

Facilitated a renaissance for eye research in Massachusetts.

In the ensuing years, \$43 million has been raised for eye research by the Lions of Massachusetts.

But back in 1950, the Great Depression was still a faint memory. Kids were watching “Howdy Doody” on 12-inch black-and-white TVs. The median family income was \$3,300 per year, and milk was still delivered to the doorstep. The average home price was \$1,940.

And babies were going blind.

During the summer of 1950, E. Daniel Johnson, then-Massachusetts District Governor of 33N, was visited by a friend who brought with him his four-year-old son, blind since birth with retrolental fibroplasia or so-called “baby blindness.”

Turns out that Johnson’s fellow Lion, Massachusetts 33K District Governor Harry Hartford, also had a friend with a blind baby—Al

Hirshberg, a sports writer for the Boston Post and a Trustee of the Foundation for Eye Research.

In October 1950, these men—Johnson, Hartford and Hirshberg—along with a small group of Lions, met with Dr. Edwin B. Dunphy, Professor of Ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School and Chief of Staff at the Massachusetts Eye & Ear Infirmary. Dr. Dunphy explained that there was a disease, discovered just 10 years previously by Dr. Theodore L. Terry at Boston's Lying-In Hospital (known today as Brigham & Women's Hospital), called retrolental fibroplasia (commonly known as “baby blindness”) that was affecting 4 out of 5 premature babies weighing less than 4 pounds. With no known pathology and no financial resources to investigate the cause, 2,500 babies (just the US) were losing their sight every year.

What could be done?

An informal meeting in DG Harry Hartford's hotel room at the 1951 Lions Clubs International Convention in Atlanta led into the first committee appointed by the Council of Governors in October 1951, which then led to Eye Research being voted at the State convention in 1952 as the statewide official project of the Lions of Massachusetts; The Lions of Massachusetts raised a whopping \$5,000, equivalent to \$50,000+ in today's dollars. Soon thereafter, the first Eye Research Grant was given to Dr. Theodore H. Ingalls of Harvard Medical School, who was instrumental in confirming that baby blindness was being caused by using too much oxygen in the incubators of premature babies. Today over 150,000 adults can see because of the foresight and concern of these Lions.

Soon thereafter, the Lions supported the Ophthalmic Plastics Laboratory, operated by Dr. William Stone, Jr., which developed pure plastic corneas to be used for persons afflicted with scarred corneas.

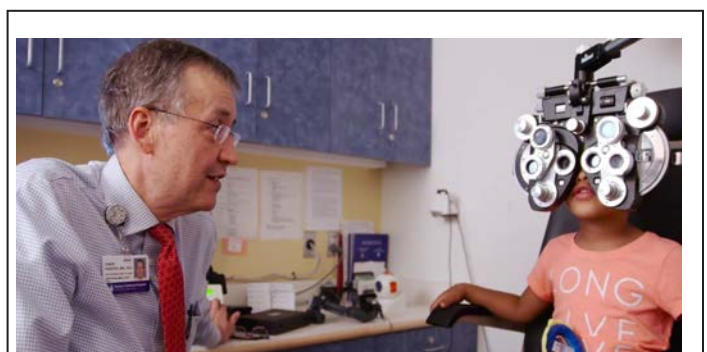
In 1953 support was given to the Joslin Clinic under the direction of Dr. Elliot P. Joslin, an energetic man in his early nineties, concerned with the cure for diabetes, which is the leading cause of blindness in the United States. The "Lions Laser Lens" project, which can detect diabetes in the eye before any other physical signs appear, was headed by Dr. Sven Bursell. In addition, Tufts New England Medical Center's Dr. Bertram Silverstone also received grants for his work using radioactive isotopes to cure eye and brain tumors. Further, Dr. Bernard Schwartz at Tufts New England Medical Center received Lions support for his work on modern photographic techniques for damage to the optic nerve and disc in glaucoma.

By 1955, a \$45,000 fellowship was awarded established in honor of Dr. Edwin B. Dunphy for his contributions to eye research. The Retina Foundation (now known as The Schepens Eye Research Institute), under the direction of Dr. Charles Schepens, constructed the first upside down operating table to repair detached retinas using the Lions grant. Schepens has the longest continuous relationship with MLERF and have dedicated some of their laboratories to the Lions for their continued support of their research efforts.



In fact, there are three major laboratories dedicated to the Massachusetts Lions. The first was at the Mass. Eye & Ear Infirmary called the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology run by Dr. David Cogan. The Fund set aside \$40,000 for a lab for young doctors being trained in eye research. The lab was actually a janitorial supply room located on the top of the building and was affectionately known as "The Lions Penthouse."

The second laboratory was established in 1969 at Boston University Medical Center, where a major commitment was made for space located on the 9th floor of the new instructional building. It was dedicated exclusively to eye research and is known as "Massachusetts Lions Eye Research Laboratory." Dr. Ephraim Friedman, the first director, and his successor, Dr. Howard Liebowitz, were instrumental in conceiving, designing and constructing one of the first photocoagulator ophthalmic laser beams, which was later used in surgery. The prototype was housed in an entire room, while today's model is the size of a small microwave oven. The world's first clinical specular microscope was also conceived and built here. In 1975 the "Elton MacNeil Memorial Unit" was dedicated in his name for his many years as chairman and president (1954–1961) of the Mass Lions Eye Research Fund, Inc. PDG MacNeil was known as "Mister Massachusetts Lions Eye Research."



David Hunter, MD, PhD. Boston Children's Hospital

The third laboratory was established in 2011 at Schepens Eye Research Institute. The Lions Laboratory for Genetic Research was established by Dr. Neena Haider to treat and prevent retinal diseases. The lab identified a genetic modifier that is able to ameliorate retinal degeneration. The lab's current research also revealed a novel role for Vitamin D metabolism in the de-

velopment of Age-related Macular Degeneration (AMD) and antioxidants in neuroprotection from light-induced retinal damage. The lab has also developed unique genetic models to study the retinal and vascular observable characteristics associated with macular degeneration.

These are just a few of the major Boston research centers we have supported over the years and just a few examples of some of the basic research conducted in those early years. Today, research has moved light years ahead with the use of DNA, growing of culture cells and the separation of genes to find the genetic cause of eye diseases, but there is still so much more to be done.



The Massachusetts Lions Eye Research Fund Inc. was incorporated on January 20, 1958, and was given tax exempt status 501(c)(3) in February 1959. In 1971, a memorial fund was established to honor the memory of a loved one allowing individuals to contribute. A separate Trust and Endowment Fund was established in 1980 to perpetuate our research efforts. Today the T&E corpus is over \$1,800,000. The 1998/1999 year was the first time the Fund raised over \$1 million in a single year in donations from the clubs and memorials.

The first statewide project offered to the Clubs was the sale of Westinghouse "Light Bulbs." The Fund bought the bulbs wholesale, and they were then distributed to the clubs for door-to-door sale. This was a major fundraiser for many years through the late 60s and 70s. In the mid 1970s we participated in "White Cane Day" during which white cane stickers were given out for donations. In April 1983 all the special fundraising projects were combined into the "Journey for Sight" project, which asked each club to have one extra project and contribute the proceeds in addition to their regular donations. It was the first time the Fund used advertising on radio, newspapers and TV along with T-Shirts, hats and aprons. The "Pennies" project was born at the same time using a 1/2 gallon milk container to collect coins in local establishments across Massachusetts. The container displayed the new "Lions Logo" and the "Journey for Sight" lettering. In June 1982 the Fund was designated as the Charity of the Senior PGA Golf Classic at Marlboro Country Club. The sponsor was Digital

Equipment Corp., who donated a \$25,000 computer for eye research. It was given to Joslin Clinic, and was the first computer to be used for research at that center.

In 1999 the Fund established a "**Presidential Grant**" in conjunction with Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF). It is a one-time grant, separate from the normal grants, directed towards projects which do not meet the normal grant criteria but are considered worthy for the advancement of eye research. LCIF matches the MLERF monies up to \$150,000 annually. To date there have been \$3,500,00 in matching grants.

Over the years, the Fund has given out over \$43 million in research grants. We are proud of the fact that every penny donated since 1951 has been given back in grants to many of Massachusetts prestigious medical and academic facilities. These grants are directed for pure conceptual vision research projects.

These initial grants are the "seed money" used to fund initial "*brain to bench*" – clinical research and the first clinical trials to prove the efficacy of the research to bring these brilliant ideas to life. Once these concepts have been proven, researchers may then apply for further grants through the National Institute of Health and other federal and private sources. Because of Lions support, Boston has become one of the leading eye research hubs in the world.

Much has been accomplished...

but there is still much more to be achieved.

