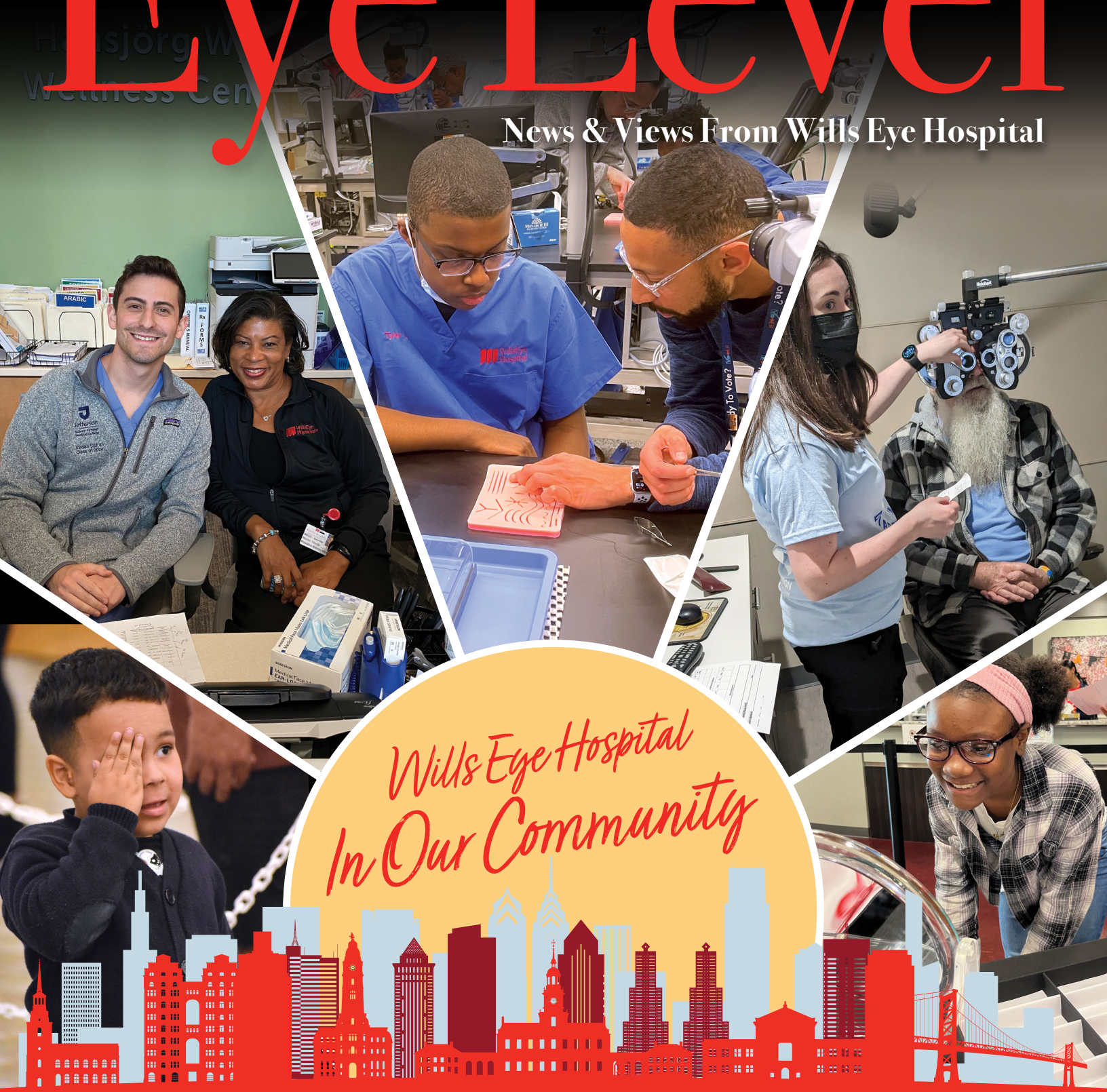


Eye Level

WINTER 2024

News & Views From Wills Eye Hospital



Wills Eye Hospital
In Our Community



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BEYOND OUR WALLS**

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**WILLS EYE BALL
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From Our Leaders



JULIA A. HALLER, MD

Ophthalmologist-in-Chief

JOSEPH P. BILSON

Chief Executive Officer

Happy New Year! The theme for our Winter 2024 issue of *Eye Level* is **Community**. In fact, community has been the focal point of the hospital's mission from the very beginning. In 1832, when Quaker merchant James Wills left his entire estate to the City of Philadelphia to establish a hospital for the indigent blind, his intent was clear: to meet the significant and evolving needs of community members. That pivotal act of philanthropy and foresight has grown exponentially in more ways than Wills could have imagined, and our understanding of "community" has expanded.

As the first hospital in the nation dedicated solely to eye care, Wills Eye was a pioneer in defining the specialty of ophthalmology. We continued to innovate, establishing formal educational programs and subspecialties. We educate physicians from around the world and offer fellowships in the full range of ocular subspecialties. Besides having trained the most ophthalmologists in the United States, we have a global diaspora of alumni who touch lives every day. One example is through our Center for Academic Global Ophthalmology, teaching and performing sight-saving procedures in various countries such as Rwanda. Our local outreach has had a tangible ripple effect into the broader global community.

Our cover story, pages 2 and 3, provides a glimpse of some of our local programs that have a dramatic impact in the City of Philadelphia and surrounding region. Improving sight, preserving vision, and changing lives is evident in every initiative. When we see a child grinning from ear to ear as they try on their first pair of glasses, as we witness a fully engaged teenager listening to mentors share the story of how they entered the profession, or when a patient thanks us, with tears of joy, for sight-saving surgery during an MLK Day of Service, we know we are fulfilling our mission.

As global leaders in training, research, education, clinical trials, and breakthrough treatments, we are excited about the upcoming 76th Annual Wills Eye Conference, March 7 through 9. We'll again host an all-star cast of speakers from the Wills family and around the globe. On page 1, Conference Co-Chairs Sunir J. Garg, MD, FACS, FASRS, and Zeba A. Syed, MD, share a sneak peek.

At our Wills Eye Ball this past October, page 4, we honored Cornea Service leaders, past and present. We are so grateful to

Peter and Ruth Laibson and family for their lead gift, which will enable the hospital to establish a Cornea Service Chief Endowed Chair.

We are inspired by the story of Noah Donovan, page 5. Fearing the possibility that he could lose his vision, the 21-year-old viewed Wills Eye as his last shred of hope. Glaucoma specialist Reza Razeghinejad, MD (Dr. Reza), found a way to treat his congenital condition, which has proven life-changing.

Another Wills Eye physician, Joel S. Schuman, MD, FACS, an internationally renowned clinician-scientist, has impacted countless lives and significantly advanced the field of ophthalmology. Dr. Schuman was part of a team that invented optical coherence tomography (OCT) over 30 years ago. The technology is an essential tool used worldwide to detect and treat diseases of the eye, particularly retinal and optic nerve disorders. Late last year, Dr. Schuman was saluted as three of his engineering collaborators received the 2023 Lasker-DeBakey Clinical Medical Research Award. Next to the Nobel Prize, it's the most prestigious award in medicine.

We are so proud that many of our physicians continue to be named as "Top Docs" and on *The Ophthalmologist's Power List*. Many of our faculty and alumni have received well-deserved awards, been installed in famous professorships, and given prestigious named lectureships over the last year. For example, in November, Carol L. Shields, MD, Director of the Ocular Oncology Service, received the Future Vision Foundation Award for her "dedication, accomplishments, and unwavering commitment to ophthalmology and the vision community."

Above and beyond awards, publications, inventions, and breakthrough discoveries, our physicians continue to push the envelope of excellence and innovation.

At our core, Wills Eye is also all about mentoring the next generation—through our residency and fellowship programs and working with the many college and medical students that volunteer in our clinics and community programs.

We are confident that this year will continue the trajectory and exceed the last in every way—we are so proud to pass the torch!

Wishing you the best of health in 2024! 🍷

Eye Level

NEWS & VIEWS FROM
WILLS EYE HOSPITAL
WINTER 2024
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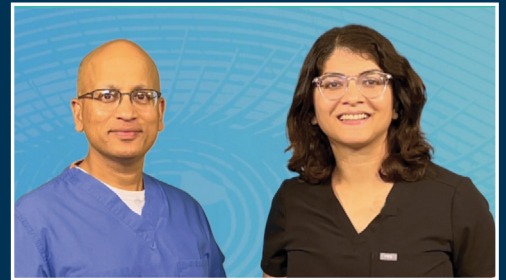
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On the Cover (clockwise from bottom left): Give Kids Sight Day; Access Clinic volunteers: medical student Jordan Safran and Nicole Vance Harris, Practice Manager, Wills Eye Physicians-Rittenhouse Eye; Saif Hamdan, MD (right), and Planting Seeds participant; Jacqueline Benoit, OD (left), examines a patient during Wills Eye on Diabetes Day; Give Kids Sight Day Glasses Pickup.

SIT-DOWN WITH SUNIR J. GARG, MD, FACS, FASRS AND ZEBA A. SYED, MD

**Co-Chairs of the 76th Annual Wills Eye Conference
March 7 – 9, 2024, Philadelphia**

Sponsored by the Wills Eye Alumni Society, the conference is the highlight of the academic year, focusing on cutting-edge, thought-provoking topics geared toward physicians, researchers, administrators, and technicians.



▲ Sunir J. Garg, MD, FACS, FASRS and Zeba A. Syed, MD

Sunir J. Garg, MD, FACS, FASRS

*Attending physician, Retina Service
Co-Director, Retina Research*

Q. What is unique about the Wills Eye Annual Conference?

A. One of the great things is that we cover all specialties. This is the one time each year I get to glimpse all of the amazing things my colleagues in other parts of ophthalmology are doing to help their patients. It's truly inspiring!

The conference highlights Wills faculty and our wonderful alumni. It brings everybody together to celebrate the Wills family and legacy. It's my favorite way to learn and connect with friends and colleagues right here in Philadelphia.

Q. What has been the most rewarding aspect of chairing the conference?

A. I've been honored to serve as chair since 2019 and have had the opportunity to work with and meet a lot of talented people, both from Wills Eye as well as ophthalmology stars from around the world. Having one-on-one time with some of the luminaries in our profession has been a wonderful experience.

Q. In what specific ways has the conference evolved over the years?

A. As the field advances, so does our programming. This year, we're introducing a Research Symposium with outstanding speakers who will discuss topics including gene therapy, cell-based therapy, imaging, and other innovations.

Participants can explore our updated interactive exhibition area to view the latest products, devices, and services in ophthalmology.

Besides the exceptional educational aspect, we place great emphasis on socializing with colleagues. We have allotted time for this after the program on Thursday and Friday.

Q. What is the advantage of having a co-chair?

A. Dr. Zeba Syed is one of the rising stars in ophthalmology. She has brought fresh ideas and enthusiasm and has incorporated innovative ways to highlight the contributions of our Wills Eye faculty.

Zeba A. Syed, MD

*Attending physician, Cornea Service
Director, Cornea Fellowship*

Q. How do you feel about being named co-chair?

A. I am incredibly honored. I recall attending my first Wills conference in 2019 as a new faculty member and feeling amazed by the quality of the talks and stature of the invited faculty. I'm excited to play a role in this integral piece of the Wills tradition.

Q. What are some of the highlights this year that you are particularly excited about?

A. Like Dr. Garg, I am excited about our inaugural Research Symposium. We are eager to hear from prominent investigators about basic science and translational and clinical research on stem cells, ocular genetics, and imaging. Our goal is to foster interdisciplinary dialogue and generate research ideas to further our field.

I am super excited about our named lecturers. As always, we have a powerhouse panel of ophthalmology leaders. I've trained under several of these lecturers, which makes this conference especially meaningful.

Q. What is new this year?

A. Besides the research addition, we are introducing an Innovation Panel, highlighting research conducted at Wills Eye. Our esteemed speakers, Drs. Peter Laibson, Joel Schuman, and Ajay Kuriyan, will share innovations from their areas of expertise.

Q. Do you have any short and/or long-term goals for the conference?

A. I hope to further incorporate forums for creative engagement. Whenever I attend a conference, whether it's AAO or a subspecialty meeting, my goal is to leave with new ideas—clinical, surgical, or research. I hope that attendees will leave feeling inspired to try something new!

Q. What is unique about the conference?

A. It's the incorporation of pearls of wisdom from multiple subspecialties. The conference fuses clinical, surgical, and research themes to create a high-yield product that caters to all members of our ophthalmology community. ■■■

Community Impact

In 1832, James Wills bequeathed \$108,395.35 to the City of Philadelphia to construct a hospital for the indigent blind. That defining act of philanthropy has continued to evolve for nearly 200 years.

With an ongoing mission to preserve and restore vision, Wills Eye Hospital is much more than a global leader in cutting-edge medical care. The hospital’s outreach, far beyond its walls, improves the quality of life for members of the local community and beyond. It is our dedicated staff, spirited volunteers, and the generosity of philanthropic individuals that make it all possible.

Wills Eye is committed to strengthening the community by implementing programs and events that further its mission through clinical care, research, and education. Here is a snapshot of some of these initiatives.



Give Kids Sight Day

There is no better gift than to bestow the power of sight to children! *Give Kids Sight Day* (GKSD) has been doing just that since 2009. Since its inception, the community-wide effort has provided free vision screenings to over 11,000 children, ages 6 to 17.

“The most rewarding part of the day is being able to help kids who don’t have access to eye care,” said Barry N. Wasserman, MD, pediatric ophthalmologist. “It is an honor and a privilege to serve as the clinical lead for this incredible event.”

The screenings have proven life-changing. If a child needs glasses, a prescription is provided on the spot by an ophthalmologist or optometrist. If pathology is discovered, the child is referred back to a Wills Eye physician. A few weeks after GKSD, children return to pick up two free pairs of glasses. “When we see the children’s faces light up as they put on their new glasses, it is truly magical,” said Dr. Wasserman. “It’s really amazing and very impressive to see a community, a region, taking care of its own. What a gift to be able to do that.”

GKSD, in partnership with OneSight EssilorLuxottica Foundation, Thomas Jefferson University, and the School District of Philadelphia, brings together a team of devoted volunteers: staff, residents, medical students, technicians, ophthalmologists, and optometrists from throughout the Delaware Valley and as far as Allentown, Reading, and Princeton.



“When we see the children’s faces light up as they put on their new glasses, it is truly magical.”

—Barry N. Wasserman, MD

Wills Eye on Diabetes Day Aims to Educate, Raise Awareness

Diabetes is the number one cause of blindness among working age Americans. With this startling statistic in mind, Allen C. Ho, MD, Director of Retina Research and Co-Director of the Retina Service, is on an all-out mission to change this trajectory. “Our moonshot goal is to eliminate preventable diabetic blindness and to be the first city to do so,” said Dr. Ho who, along with a team of retina specialists, Jefferson medical students, and others, launched the first *Wills Eye on Diabetes Day* in 2022.

The initiative has provided free diabetic eye screenings for community members. As a result, a number of people have been diagnosed with diabetic eye disease and proliferative diabetic retinopathy. Prescriptions have also been provided for numerous pairs of eyeglasses, free of charge.

For the 2023 event, Dr. Ho and his team inspired Scheie Eye Institute and Temple Ophthalmology to take part in the day—an effort he hopes will energize and accelerate the work of dedicated volunteers.

Diabetes is highly prevalent in the Greater Philadelphia region, explained Dr. Ho. Recognizing that disparities exist in access to care and education, the event aims to raise awareness about this public health problem and the importance of prevention. “The screenings enable us to identify patients who need eye care,” he said. “We then help people with insurance coverage, referrals, follow-up appointments. It takes a village.”

Registration is required for the April 20 event. Visit willseye.org/diabetes-day.

This program is supported by a grant from the Albert B. Millett Memorial Fund and Regeneron Pharmaceuticals Inc.



Back row (from left): Ajay Kuriyan, MD, Allen C. Ho, MD, Marc Spirn, MD, Jordan Deaner, MD, David Xu, MD. Front: Asha Kuriyan and Kate Spirn.

“Our moonshot goal is to eliminate preventable diabetic blindness and to be the first city to do so.”

—Allen C. Ho, MD



Glenn Oh, medical student and a clinic leader, obtains an auto refraction.



Brenton D. Finklea, MD

“Our goal is to offer access to eye care to an underrepresented population.”

—Brenton D. Finklea, MD

Wills Eye Access Clinic

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, when Wills Eye global fellows were not able to travel internationally, Brenton D. Finklea, MD, Director of the Center for Academic Global Ophthalmology (CAGO), sought an alternative way to help members of the local community.

Dr. Finklea teamed with John Anhalt, MD, CAGO Fellowship Director, and Omair Ali, MD, who at the time was the Wills Eye Global Fellow. Together, the three physicians founded the *Wills Eye Access Clinic*. “Our goal is to offer access to eye care to an underrepresented population,” said Dr. Finklea. “The majority of patients are non-English speaking with limited health care coverage.”

Housed inside the Hansjörg Wyss Wellness Center in South Philadelphia, the clinic opened its doors in late 2021. Staffed by CAGO fellows, Wills Eye physicians, and Jefferson medical students, a range of eye services are provided including wellness checks, diabetic exams, eyeglass prescriptions, and cataract and glaucoma treatments.

The clinic expanded its reach in January 2023, when physicians performed free sight-saving cataract surgeries to a dozen patients during the Wills Eye MLK Day of Service. Plans are under way to continue this in 2024.

“Everyone who works in our center feels a pull and a calling to serve the underserved,” said Dr. Finklea.

Wills Eye Vision Screening Program Making a Difference for Children

Since 2014, this community outreach initiative has changed the lives of thousands of K-8 students in urban Philadelphia schools. A team, consisting of an optometrist, optician, and program director, works closely with school nurses to conduct vision screenings. The goal is to improve vision by prescribing and dispensing eyeglasses along with referrals for pediatric ophthalmic care at Wills Eye Hospital. “Children with uncorrected visual impairments may be struggling unnecessarily in the classroom,” said Kammi B. Gunton, MD, Chief, Pediatric Ophthalmology Service. “We want to ensure that they are screened and treated in a timely manner.”

The Wills Eye team works with 30 elementary schools in the School District of Philadelphia and a

dozen Boys & Girls Clubs of America during the summer. Since its inception, the program has conducted 64,000 vision screenings, distributed over 26,000 pairs of glasses, and provided follow-up care for nearly 1,500 children with more serious eye conditions.

Program funding is provided by donors; eyeglasses by OneSite EssilorLuxottica Foundation.

Planting Seeds for the Future Mentors Take Youth Under Their Wings

In 2021, with a deep commitment to introducing underserved Philadelphia area youth to possible future careers in ophthalmology, Wills Eye Hospital kicked off its inaugural *Planting Seeds* event. The hospital has since held several outreach programs, partnering with both the KB Foundation and Girard College. Wills Eye physicians, residents, and staff serve as mentors and share personal stories of their career journeys.

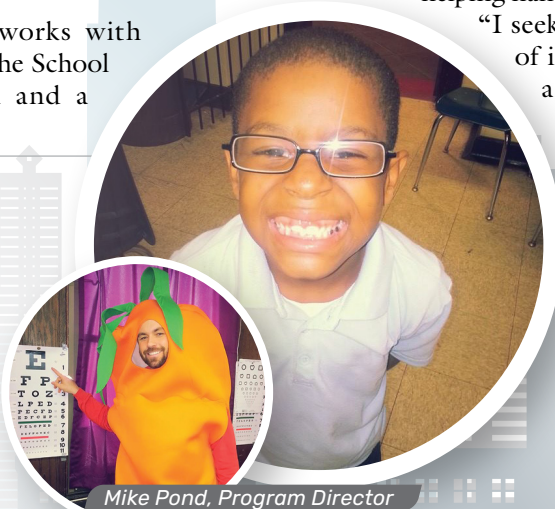
Participants are given personalized surgical scrubs and spend time in the William Maul Measey Ophthalmic Surgical Training (MOST) Lab. They learn about eye anatomy and glean hands-on experience by suturing artificial skin, using a slit lamp, and inserting artificial lenses in training eyes to simulate cataract surgery. They also spend time in the diagnostic lab where they operate testing equipment and learn about ocular photography.

Walter P. Harris Jr., MD, cataract and primary eye care specialist, who serves as a mentor, finds it gratifying to give back to the community. “When I was young, there were ophthalmologists who inspired me and offered a helping hand in my professional development,” he said. “I seek to be a positive role model and a source of inspiration, proving that with hard work and dedication, you can achieve your career goals.”



“Children with uncorrected visual impairments may be struggling unnecessarily in the classroom.”

—Kammi B. Gunton, MD



Mike Pond, Program Director

“I seek to be a positive role model and a source of inspiration.”

—Walter P. Harris Jr., MD

WILLS EYE BALL CELEBRATES CORNEA SERVICE

The event, attended by Wills Eye faculty, alumni, residents, fellows, supporters, and grateful patients, was emceed by Ukee Washington of KYW-TV, Philadelphia.

More than 350 guests gathered at the Wills Eye Ball on October 21 at The Bellevue Hotel in Philadelphia, raising over \$410,000. The event celebrated the Cornea Service and honored Peter R. Laibson, MD, Director Emeritus; Elisabeth J. Cohen, MD, former Director; and Christopher J. Rapuano, MD, Director. A surprise announcement was met with excitement from the crowd when Ophthalmologist-in-Chief Julia A. Haller, MD, shared that the Laibson family had made a lead gift to establish the Peter and Ruth Laibson Cornea Service Chief Endowed Chair.

Dr. Rapuano is slated to be the inaugural chairholder. Proceeds from the event will support renovations to the Cornea Service and the Endowed Chair, reaching the hospital's goal of \$2.5 million to fully fund this important leadership role. ■■■



◀ Wills Eye Hospital residents



▲ From left: Julia A. Haller, MD, Peter R. Laibson, MD, Christopher J. Rapuano, MD, Elisabeth J. Cohen, MD, and Joseph P. Bilson during the presentation of Wills Eye bowls to honorees.



▲ Peter and Ruth Laibson



▶ Cornea Service attending physicians



▲ Peter and Ruth Laibson, fourth and third from right, with family members. From left: Rebecca Popell, Audrey Wolf, Max Laibson, Nina Zipser, David Laibson, Rachel Laibson, Maritza Gerena.

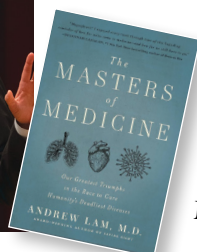


Julia A. Haller, MD, Named a Distinguished Daughter of PA

Congratulations to Julia A. Haller, MD (third from left), who was inducted into the Distinguished Daughters of Pennsylvania Class of 2023. Gov. Josh Shapiro, right, recognized the new inductees at the Governor's Residence in Harrisburg, where he and his wife, Lori, hosted the group. The Distinguished Daughters honor the contributions of Pennsylvania women: leaders in government, business, education, healthcare, and more. ■■■

Edward A. Jaeger, MD Endowed Lectureship

At the 2023 Edward A. Jaeger, MD Endowed Lectureship, Wills Eye alumnus and best-selling author Andrew Lam, MD, addressed "The Mavericks: Philadelphia Surgeons Who Transformed Medicine and Changed the World." Dr. Lam is Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, partner at New England Retina Consultants, and attending surgeon at Baystate Medical Center. ■■■



DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Every Child Deserves Quality Eye Care

Joan Garde believes that all children should have access to eye care: vision screening, glasses, surgery—whatever they need. She is also keenly aware that some in the community cannot afford quality care or health insurance.



The Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania resident explained that over the years she has dealt with multiple eye issues. She is grateful that Wills Eye Hospital and Christopher J. Rapuano, MD, Chief of the Cornea Service, have been there for her. "My mother and grandmother both had glaucoma," she said. "My mother was also treated at Wills Eye."

When Joan's husband, Joseph, passed away about a decade ago, she wanted to do something meaningful to honor his memory. The couple had previously made a donation that enabled the former Chief of Pediatric Ophthalmology, Alex Levin, MD, to perform surgery on a 13-year-old boy from Africa. The boy was blind, and Dr. Levin restored his sight in one eye. Remembering that dramatic result, Joan inquired at the hospital to contribute to a fund to help children. When she discovered that no such fund existed, she was compelled to establish the **Joan and Joseph Garde Family Fund for Children**. "I knew this was also something that my husband would have wanted, said Joan.

"No child should have to struggle with vision issues in school or anywhere. I am very proud and happy that I am able to make an impact by helping children." ■■■

Noah Donovan

WILLS EYE: THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME

Noah Donovan was born with bilateral congenital glaucoma. The rare condition, which often presents with a heightened sensitivity to sunlight and a whitening of the cornea, was diagnosed when he was an infant. “When Noah was three months old, his eye pressure was over 46,” recalled his mom, Sarah Donovan. “Typical eye pressure is under 21.”

For the 21-year-old of Skaneateles, New York, doctor’s appointments, eye drops, surgeries, and missed school days have been an integral theme throughout his life. “Noah has had about 14 to 18 procedures, including a goniotomy and a trabeculectomy,” said Sarah, adding that the goal of the surgeries was to drain fluid from the eyes and lower pressure. Some of the procedures involved inserting a drainage tube, known as a shunt.

Throughout childhood, the glaucoma, a progressive eye disease, presented certain obstacles for Noah. He could not participate in high-risk contact sports, such as tackle football. But he was able to partake in baseball and basketball. And his vision impairment never stopped him from pursuing his passion for modifying and customizing cars, a hobby he shares with his dad, Tim Donovan. “Noah has always persevered; he is resilient,” said Sarah.

Yet in the fall of 2022, the glaucoma specialist in Syracuse who had been treating Noah explained that there wasn’t much more he could do for him. Noah would need more specialized care. The physician suggested Wills Eye Hospital. “For the first time in his life, Noah was facing a revelation that he could possibly lose his eyesight,” recalled Sarah.” He was shaken to his core.”

In October 2022, Sarah drove the four hours to take Noah to Wills Eye Hospital for a consultation with glaucoma specialist Reza Razeghinejad, MD (Dr. Reza). They had no idea what to expect.

“I felt like I had arrived at the right place at the right time,” said Noah. “It was a safe haven. Dr. Reza was very welcoming. He made me feel comfortable and that he would make sure I would get the treatment I needed.”

At the time, Noah had two shunts in his right eye and one in his left. Shortly after that consultation, Dr. Reza performed the first of two surgeries, a tube exchange in his right eye. He removed an Ahmed shunt



▲ Noah Donovan

(a drainage tube with a valve) and implanted a Baerveldt shunt. “This was a challenging surgery, but the shunt I implanted had a much better chance of lowering Noah’s eye pressure,” explained Dr. Reza. A few weeks later, Dr. Reza performed a tube exchange to his left eye.

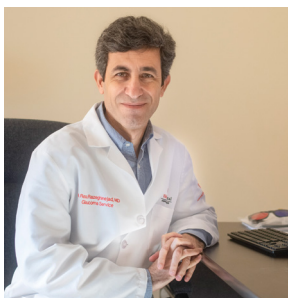
“A tube exchange is not a common surgery, but the long-term benefits are more promising than other options,” said Dr. Reza. “A laser procedure is generally not as effective, and the presence of a tube can cause corneal swelling over time.” Having more tubes, he elaborated, would increase the chances of this happening.

“Dr. Reza saved my vision and prevented it from getting worse,” said Noah, adding that his eyesight improved and eye pressure came down significantly after the surgeries. “It makes me feel really good that there’s someone who is looking out for me.”

Sarah is immensely grateful. “One of the most touching things was when Dr. Reza told Noah that he thinks about him all the time and is constantly researching ways to treat his condition,” she said.

And this past May, Noah enrolled in driving school, working to earn a Commercial Driver’s License (CDL) to operate Class B vehicles: dump trucks, school buses, heavy operating equipment. In December, he passed the test and obtained the license. This would not have been possible before the surgeries.

“I cannot say enough about Dr. Reza and Wills Eye,” said Sarah. “The entire staff made everything as seamless as possible—helping us find a place to stay, answering our questions, always returning calls after hours. Dr. Reza is genuine and compassionate; he made Noah feel at ease. I have never met someone with such empathy. I have found peace and value in the whole experience.” ■■■



▲ Reza Razeghinejad, MD



“Dr. Reza was very welcoming. He made me feel comfortable and that he would make sure I would get the treatment I needed.”

—Noah Donovan



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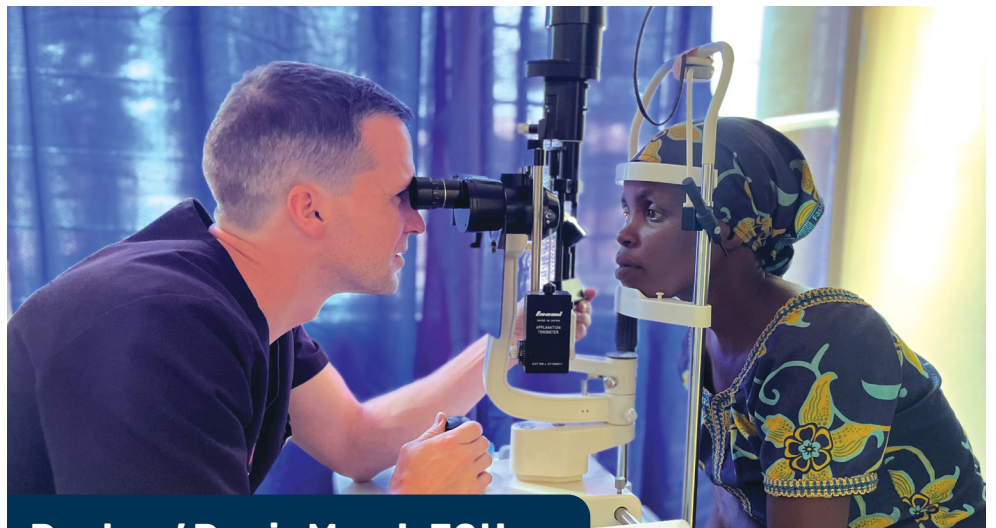
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*Wills Eye Committee Member



Doctors' Day is March 30th

Celebrate a special Wills Eye doctor by making a gift in their honor and including a personal note of gratitude that will be delivered on March 30 – Doctors' Day!

Keep an eye out for more information via mail, email, and social media or visit www.willseye.org/national-doctors-day to make your gift today. You can also return the envelope inserted in this newsletter and note that your contribution is for Doctors' Day.

Wills Eye Conference

March 7 – 9, 2024
Philadelphia, PA

The Wills Eye Conference is a can't-miss experience. You'll hear ophthalmology's leading experts discuss in-depth, practical approaches and key innovations that address today's challenges in patient care.

willsconference.org

SAVE the DATE 2024

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**Wills Eye on
Diabetes Day**

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