



THROUGH  
ANOTHER'S  
EYES

SOMETIMES FOCUS CAN BE FOUND OUTSIDE TRADITIONAL SIGHTLINES.

**W**hat would you do if your sight was suddenly gone; if one minute you were driving down the road, humming along with the radio, and the next, you could barely see?

That's exactly what Elizabeth "Liz" Moore found herself facing in the fall of 1985, driving home from Auburn, Ala. "I realized I could not see out of my right eye," she said. Moore said she wasn't very frightened at the time because she had been outside playing golf, and thought it was simply the cold bothering her eye.

The next day, she realized she couldn't see to put on her makeup. The following Monday, she went to see her ophthalmologist, Dr. Lamar Campbell. "When he looked at the eye, he became very concerned and told me 'Liz, I hope this isn't what I am looking at, but I may as well tell you, you have ischemic optic neuropathy,' and he instantly gave me shots in my eye," Moore said. It was at that point she realized what she could

be facing. "When I walked out the door, it hit me that this is my sight," she said. "My husband and I went all over the country searching for an answer, but there was none."

Ischemic optic neuropathy could more simply be called a stroke of the optic nerve. It strikes almost instantly in one eye, and in most cases progresses to the other eye over time, which was the case with Moore's vision. There is no cure for this condition. "When you first lose that vision and find out that nothing can be done, that's a great despair," she said.

But instead of dwelling on her own inabilities, Moore went to work in the years since her diagnosis to help others facing the same challenges. "I began to realize what happened to people who could not be helped," she said. Moore, a 1956 University of Alabama graduate, established the Liz Moore Low Vision Center at St. Vincent's Hospital in Birmingham, Ala., where people with similar eye problems can seek help.

According to the center's website, low vision can be defined as visual acuity that, after correction, is not sufficient to allow a person to do the things they want to do. It can be caused by disease, accidents or other physical conditions. The Low Vision Center provides rehabilitation services, counseling, support groups, holiday art contests and even a golf school for the visually impaired. Moore said she is proud of what it has accomplished, because much of the work she does is to help those just like her. "I work with people who are in total despair, and I work with people who know they will never have vision again," she said.

Moore can no longer read or drive, but that hasn't stopped her from impacting the lives of others. She has been honored on many fronts, receiving the 1999 Award of Merit from the Southern Council of Optometrists and being named the 1989 Birmingham Woman of the Year. "It's been quite a trip, but I've enjoyed every step of the

by JESSIE JONES



FocusFirst assesses vision problems in children throughout the state.



way. After I lost my vision, I've had a lot of great honors, which I probably don't deserve; but I'm going to take them," she said with a chuckle.

### FAMILY MATTERS

For Birmingham-based ophthalmologist Dr. John Mason III, vision loss hits close to home. After his grandmother was diagnosed with macular degeneration, Mason turned his attention to research to help her vision improve—and helped hundreds of thousands of others in the process.

Mason, who graduated from UA in 1985 with a degree in microbiology, found that a special combination of supplemental vitamins and minerals, including lutein and zinc, could slow blindness in patients with macular degeneration. He used this research to create the Macular Health vitamin supplement to combat the condition, which is the leading cause of blindness in the United States. "This supplement has continued to slow blindness in these patients and enabled them to see better and have a better quality of life, letting them continue to drive and read," Mason said. "I also found that it could increase vision in patients with macular degeneration."

His grandmother is not alone. Thirteen million people in the United States have macular degeneration. In his



Liz Moore established a low vision center in Birmingham, Ala.

Academy of Ophthalmology in 2006.

Mason has Alabama connections that run deep. His father has worked as an accounting professor at UA for more than 40 years, and Mason finds himself back on campus each home game weekend in the fall to watch the Tide play. After graduating from UA, Mason earned his medical degree from The University of Alabama at Birmingham in 1990. He started his practice in 1996 at Retina Consultants of Alabama and the UAB Department of Ophthalmology. Mason is an associate professor at UAB's Department of Ophthalmology, where he has served as the director of retina service for the past 10 years. He treats patients who have vitreoretinal diseases such as macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy, and is the only specialist in the state who treats ocular tumors.

landmark study called "Multifocal Electroretinogram Study of Patients with Advanced Dry Macular Degeneration," Mason showed that patients who took the Macular Health supplement gained vision, whereas those who did not continued to lose their sight. "The study was the first of its kind, and it showed a way in which we could slow down vision loss and increase vision in some patients," Mason said. He presented the study to the American

Mason gives much of the credit for his success to his education. "I've been truly blessed with the ability to help prevent blindness. It all started back at The University of Alabama, when I knew that I wanted to be an eye doc-



John Mason, above with his father, grandmother and son, created the Macular Health vitamin supplement.



The Alabama Eye Bank staff

tor who tried to prevent people from going blind," he said. "I took a lot of pre-med courses at UA that prepared me for a career in medicine, which has enabled me to have the wonderful blessing of preventing people from losing their vision." Mason's grandmother continues to see, thanks to the results of his research, and he said that helping her has been one of his greatest rewards.

### A WORTHY MOMENT

Medicine changes constantly. Those in the field must learn, adapt and grow, or they risk becoming obsolete. Doyce Williams and the Alabama Eye Bank have more than risen to the challenge, flourishing over the past 30 years. Williams took the helm of the nonprofit eye-banking network as president and CEO in 1980, just five years after earning the first of two crimson-clad diplomas. Williams, BS '75, MA '76, said he found his calling early, and has remained with the eye bank because of the fulfillment that comes from the work of giving sight. "I have been with people who have been blind for decades, and were able to see with corneal transplants," he

said. "That is truly a noble and worthy moment to experience."

Williams not only oversees the Alabama Eye Bank but is also the president and executive officer of the Global Sight Network, a humanitarian effort of eye banks, physicians, vision scientists and philanthropic organizations joined for the cause of preserving sight worldwide. Between the two organizations, they serve 43 countries, as well as 25 states in the U.S.

The donation process is a simple one, Williams said. "Someone goes to an ophthalmologist and is diagnosed as needing a transplant," he said. "They call us. We place them on a surgery schedule. Unfortunately, someone passes away and donates their eyes. We process the tissue and provide that corneal surgeon the tissue for surgery. Corneal transplants are the most frequently performed and successful human transplant procedure."

In his three decades on the job, Williams said he has watched the evolution of corneal transplantation. "One of the things that impressed me the most was in 1980, someone had spoken to me about the number of people in Alabama, as well as in the U.S., who were blind due to corneal disease. I was offered the job at the time, and thought it was just amazing that in our country, where there is a vast ability to repair many corneal diseases, there were so many people on the waiting list for transplants. So I took the job."

In 1980, there were 250 people on



Doyce Williams with Wei Chen, executive director of the Wenzhou Eye Bank in China

the waiting list in the state, and some were on the list for as many as two years, he said. Now 30 years later, the Alabama Eye Bank is the fourth largest in the country. "It's really been exciting," Williams said. "Now, we provide scheduled surgery. Through the work of Global Sight Network and the Alabama Eye Bank, we provide about 12 corneas a day."

The excitement of helping to restore sight on a daily basis is what keeps Williams at his job. "It's been really wonderful, fulfilling work that I have enjoyed all these years," he said.

Williams said he made many con-



"I feel like I know someone in every county. There is an immediate bond and friendship you have when you meet fellow alums." —Doyce Williams



nections that have helped his work in the years he spent as a UA student, pursuing two degrees. “The University was a wonderful location to meet people from all over the state and to develop relationships,” he said. “That has really helped me at the eye bank. I feel like I know someone in every county. There is an immediate bond and friendship you have when you meet fellow alums.”

### PROTECTING THE FUTURE

On the UA campus, a new program has been created to reach out to children in both rural and urban areas in the state to screen them for vision problems. FocusFirst is a program of UA’s Center for Ethics and Social Responsibility, providing a cost-effective direct response to assess vision problems in children throughout the state.

For Stephen Black, director of the CESR, the two-fold purpose of FocusFirst is gratifying work. “We provide high-tech comprehensive vision care to low-income children across the state,” he said. “But just as important is the experiential learning that takes place for the college and graduate students who are participating. Most college students haven’t thought about what it’s like to grow up without a pediatrician or an optometrist.”

In the last six years, more than 250 UA students have helped the program examine more than 10,000 children at 335 daycare centers in 27 counties. Roughly 10 percent of children screened have not passed FocusFirst’s



UA quarterback Greg McElroy conducts the 100,000th FocusFirst screening in September 2010.

vision tests, and have received subsidized follow-up care as needed through Sight Savers of Alabama. Black said because this percentage of children has serious vision problems, it’s easy to stay determined. “That’s a pretty motivating factor to go provide vision care, especially when you know 10 percent of the kids in the room you’re in might not be able to see well enough to learn how to read.”

Tide quarterback Greg McElroy joined FocusFirst at schools in September 2010 for a special milestone—conducting a high-tech vision screening for the 100,000th child serviced by the program. “All the parents and the daycare workers were very excited to have him there,” Black said.

The college students are also impacted by the program. Senior communication disorders major Jaclyn Elkins volunteers her time because she knows firsthand the effects that sight difficulties can have on children. “As someone who had vision problems growing up, I think it’s important to get those identified early,” she said. “Kids can’t learn if they can’t see, so that was very important to me.” For Elkins, the process of setting up equipment and guiding children through the screening process is a tangible way to give back to her community. “It’s rewarding because a lot of the problems that come up are not necessarily hard to fix. A lot can be fixed with a simple pair of glasses,” she said.



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### YOU’RE NOT ALONE

For UA alumnus and Army veteran Bill Cohen, the struggles he would have to overcome after serving in the Vietnam War included one that he didn’t expect—one that surfaced years down the road.

Cohen, ’63, JD ’66, joined the Army’s Judge Advocate General Corps in 1966, and was in Vietnam from 1967 to 1968 before moving to Fort McPherson in Georgia. He left the Army in 1970 and took the Georgia State Bar Exam, settling down in Atlanta.

Six years later, after a routine physical that included a test to speed up his heart, Cohen woke up to distorted vision. The diagnosis came back as histoplasmosis. “I had these little histospores that, when we sped up my heart, hemorrhaged and caused my eye problems,” Cohen said. While he can never be sure, Cohen and his doctors believe that he contracted the disease when he was in Vietnam. Histoplasmosis can be spread through the air from a fungus found in bird or bat droppings. Over the years, Cohen has dealt with numerous hemorrhages in both eyes, and has taken part in studies to find a better way to treat them and improve his eye function. When the most recent one occurred in his right eye a year ago, he received cutting-edge treatment once again, this time involving shots in his eye.



Despite vision problems, Bill Cohen enjoys a fulfilling life with his wife, Nancy.



By 1999, Cohen was considered legally blind in both eyes. “When the doctor at Emory suggested I go down to the Center for the Visually Impaired, that’s when I retired from the practice of law,” he said. “It really didn’t get to where I had that much trouble until then. Prior to that, I always had some vision in one eye, even if I was having trouble in the other.”

Cohen immediately wanted to know what he could do for others going through similar problems. Shortly after becoming a client at CVI’s Low Vision Clinic, he also became a volunteer, and has put in numerous hours assisting other vision patients. “It’s a wonderful feeling to be able to help other people,” he said. “They thank me, but it’s a great support group for me, too. To be around people who have the same problems you have, you realize you’re not alone.”

In April 2010, Cohen was honored for his work with the Healthcare Georgia Foundation’s Joseph D. Greene Community Service Award. “I was almost embarrassed to receive this award because the lady next to me who also received it was Alana Sheppard, whose family started the Sheppard Spinal Center in Atlanta,” he said.

While Cohen misses reading with ease and driving himself around town, he is quick to point out the advancements from which visually impaired

people benefit today. “It’s surprising how many things are available to help those with vision problems,” he said. “Where I volunteer, some of the students are totally blind, but we teach them how to use computers. We’ve gotten some of them jobs with Air Tran. If you call and make a reservation, you could be talking to someone who is blind.”

For Cohen, living his life and enjoying his family and volunteer work have become his focus. “I’ve learned to adjust to my situation,” he said. “Life goes on, and you just have to do things a little bit different, that’s all.” ■

