

# *Eye to Eye*

Winter 1996

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## **Living With Glaucoma**

I have had my share of health problems-maybe more than my share-but you come to expect that with age. I take these things in stride and make the best of them. If there is one thing I've learned through it all, it is that you should never ignore what your body is telling you. Pay attention to changes and find out what is wrong-or what isn't wrong-by getting professional medical advice. That's what I did when I noticed a change in my vision eight years ago. I'm sharing my story with you to help educate others about glaucoma and show how early detection really is the key to treating this disease.

The first sign that something was wrong was a slight change in the peripheral vision of my right eye. I let it go for a couple of weeks thinking it might correct itself. When it didn't, I made an appointment to see an ophthalmologist. My doctor discovered that it was the beginning stages of glaucoma. I can't say I was shocked. I knew glaucoma could affect people as they got older. What did surprise me was that the disease affected both eyes, and yet I had experienced no symptoms in the left eye. If I had not gone to the eye doctor, my condition would not have been discovered. By the time any signs of glaucoma showed up, it may have been too late to save my eyesight.

My doctor acted quickly to treat my glaucoma. He put a drain in my right eye to lower the intraocular pressure. The results have been gratifying. I have no vision loss in either eye. My prescription eyeglasses did not even have to be increased in strength.

Ever since that time, I have had regular appointments to check the pressure and make sure that the condition does not progress. At the age of 74, I am leading a very happy, active life - better than most people who are ten years younger than me. I tell my family and friends that I'm living proof that early detection of glaucoma is the best treatment of all.

I was not familiar with glaucoma when I was first diagnosed with it. I didn't know that it was the leading preventable cause of blindness in the world today. I think glaucoma has been pushed in the background far too long. I'd like to make people more aware of it and urge them to have their eyes examined regularly. Eyesight is extremely important to your long-term health and well being.

I hope you'll listen to my message. Don't ignore changes in your vision. See your eye doctor. It may turn out to be nothing but it's important to find out-not only so that you can receive treatment, but for your own peace of mind, as well.

## **The Ninth Annual Black and White Ball**

Nearly 850 attendees, including many leading figures from the Wall Street community, were on hand to salute Gena Harper as she received the First Glaucoma Foundation Award of Merit at the 9th Annual Black & White Ball at the World Financial Center Winter Garden. Ball Chairman Howard W. Lutnick, President of the Cantor Fitzgerald Group of Companies, hosted the gala event which raised over \$1 million in gross income, the highest ever for this annual event. The Foundation's Chairman, Joseph M. La Motta, was particularly pleased with the evening's success since it will allow The Foundation to provide more and larger grants for research in the treatment and search for potential cures for glaucoma.

The Glaucoma Foundation gratefully acknowledges the many generous contributors to the Ball, the Auction and the Raffle. We would like to thank all of those who gave their time and talents to make the 1995 Black & White Ball a spectacular success. Without their dedication and efforts, this event would not have been possible.

## **The Glaucoma Foundation Award of Merit**

This year, The Black & White Ball featured an important innovation, with the establishment of The Glaucoma Foundation Award of Merit. This award honors an individual whose life has been profoundly affected by glaucoma and who has responded to the challenge with courage and distinction. The Glaucoma Foundation proudly announces Gena Harper, Vice President of Investments at Dean Witter Reynolds (Berkeley, California) as the first winner of The Glaucoma Foundation Award of Merit.

### **About Gena Harper**

Gena Harper, by all accounts, is a very special person. It is not because she has been blind since birth that makes her special - or different. It is what she has made of her life and the lives of others that makes Gena extraordinary and sets her apart in today's world.

Born with glaucoma, Gena is totally blind in one eye and can see very little with the other. Nevertheless, she became a stock broker at age 22, and is one of the few blind people in the investment industry in the United States. Now, ten years later, Gena is a Vice President of Investments at Dean Witter Reynolds in Berkeley, California. With her business partner, Carla Koren; the accompaniment of her seeing eye dog, Brighton; and the aid of talking computers and special equipment for reading, Gena currently manages millions of dollars for individual, small business and corporate investors.

Gena has a strong sense of self that enables her to deal with challenges in her professional and personal life. She explains, "In this job, I initially talk to clients on the phone, so they are unaware of my disability. They form no preconceived notions that I might have limitations in what I can accomplish based on my lack of sight. By the time I meet them, they already have a high level of confidence in me because of our good service and expertise in managing their investments."

Gena's determination not to let her vision problems prevent her from succeeding began to manifest itself before Gena found her career. She became an award-winning downhill skier, and an accomplished rock climber, wind surfer, hiker and rafter. As a result of her athletic triumphs, she developed positive expectations that she has carried into all aspects of her life.

Today, Gena is happily married and, in addition to a hectic business and personal life, she not only finds time for The Glaucoma Foundation, but is also active in the California Governor's Rehabilitation Advisory Council and Girls, Inc. She is the Chair of Friends of Youth Campaign at the YMCA. Gena has also served on the Governor's Committee on the Employment of Disabled Persons, and she raises funds for the Blind Babies Foundation as well as Guide Dogs for the Blind.

"I'm a real advocate for disabled people working in the private sector," Gena says. "I can be helpful in getting business to be more active in hiring disabled workers, because I receive a lot of recognition through my career, my clients and my sports activities."

No doubt, it is Gena's energy and her resolve that have enabled her to accomplish all that she has accomplished. But, it is her heart that makes her a role model for others. Gena may not have sight, but she does have vision. And, her vision inspires everyone who meets her. This is why Gena Harper was selected to receive The Glaucoma Foundation Award of Merit. Please join The Foundation in congratulating Gena for her achievements.

## Doctor, I Have a Question

**Q:** Please explain the use of calcium channel blockers in glaucoma treatment. Do they replace other medications such as beta-blockers or are they used in conjunction with other glaucoma medications? Is it more dangerous to the patient to use calcium channel blockers when the patient is being treated for other health problems such as heart disease?

**A:** Calcium channel blockers represent an entirely new approach to the treatment of glaucoma. Hopefully, the advent of these drugs marks only the beginning of a trend in finding new approaches to the treatment of glaucoma over the coming years.

Previously, the only form of treatment of glaucoma has involved lowering intraocular pressure (IOP), even when IOP is normal to begin with. Although the evidence is not all in yet, calcium channel blockers have been reported to increase blood flow to the eye and to stabilize the visual field. Thus, instead of lowering IOP (although they appear to do this also), calcium channel blockers increase the resistance of the eye to glaucomatous damage. Because they represent an entirely new approach to the treatment of glaucoma, they do not replace other medications that are used in conjunction with them.

There are different types of calcium channel blockers. Some primarily affect the strength with which the heart contracts, while others affect peripheral blood vessels, making them dilate so that more blood can pass through. The calcium channel blockers used in the treatment of glaucoma ideally would be those which increase blood flow to the brain, since the eye and the brain share a common blood supply.

It remains to be determined just which patients will be helped and which will not be helped, or even perhaps harmed, by calcium channel blockers. Calcium channel blockers can also lower blood pressure, and a low blood pressure predisposes to glaucomatous damage. Therefore, we do not use these drugs at the present time in patients who have low blood pressure, but only in those with normal or high blood pressure. The patient's internist or family physician should be consulted with regard to the treatment plan.

**Q:** During a recent eye exam, I was told that my IOP was 22. The doctor said that while this is a high pressure, there were no signs of glaucoma damage and that I should return in a year for a regular check-up. I am 66 with adult onset diabetes and am concerned because I have read that diabetes can lead to glaucoma and blindness. Since I enjoy an active life and read quite extensively, I am concerned that my age is leading to a "do nothing because of old age" diagnosis that some of my friends have recently received for eye and other health problems. My diabetes has been diet-controlled for quite some

**time, I have no other major health problems, and there is no known history of glaucoma in my family. Is it possible to have a high pressure and no glaucoma signs or should I look for another opinion?**

**A:**In a nutshell, it does not sound as if you need either treatment or a second opinion at this point in time, and that you should be able to look forward to a long and happy visual life with little likelihood of your going blind from glaucoma as long as you have appropriate observation and treatment if and when the latter ever becomes necessary.

The number 22 as a demarcation of abnormal IOP was arrived at back in the 1950's when statistical studies were performed of populations in an attempt to determine the average pressure. Because the average IOP was about 15 mmHg to 16 mmHg, a cutoff point was defined above which approximately only 2.5% of the population would fall. For practical purposes, considering what we know about glaucoma today, this is basically only a mathematical and arbitrary number.

The term 'ocular hypertension' arose as a working definition to describe people who had IOP of 22 mmHg or more and no detectable optic nerve or visual field damage. The rate at which people with ocular hypertension convert, or develop glaucoma, is on the order of 1% per year. Therefore, most people with elevated pressure will never develop glaucomatous damage and of those who do, a much smaller number will actually become blind. The higher the pressure, the more risk there is.

We also now realize that IOP is just one risk factor for the development of glaucoma, others being cardiovascular problems, insufficient blood flow to the eye, inherited or acquired structural weakness of the optic nerve support structures, and other, as yet undiscovered factors. People with greater amounts of these other risk factors can have glaucomatous damage develop at lower pressures. Not all patients with glaucoma have a high pressure, and it is becoming more and more evident that a large number of people can develop glaucoma at normal IOP. Therefore, pressure is not the only factor, and periodic examination of the optic nerve head and assessment of visual field status are also a part of preventive care in glaucoma.

An association between primary open-angle glaucoma and diabetes, although often conjectured, has never been proven. What can develop as a result of diabetes is neovascular glaucoma, which may occur in patients with diabetic retinopathy. However, this is a small proportion of both patients with glaucoma and patients with diabetes

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If you have a question about glaucoma, please write to:

Doctor, I Have a Question

33 Maiden Lane

New York New York 10038

1-800-GLAUCOMA

fax: 212-504-1933

E-Mail: [glaucomafdn@interramp.com](mailto:glaucomafdn@interramp.com)

## **From the Desk of the Executive Director**

Have you ever really imagined what it would be like to be unable to see? My capacity to do so was enhanced recently, when my family and I had the pleasure of hosting, for several days, a most unusual guest by the name of Gena Harper, and her seeing eye dog, Brighton. Gena's receipt of The Glaucoma Foundation's inaugural Award of Merit is chronicled elsewhere in this issue. For me, her visit to New York brought the dry statistics about glaucoma and blindness to life.

So many things which are so automatic for most of us are not automatic for Gena and for others who cannot see. Stepping on and off of curbs. Getting around in a strange city, or neighborhood. The practical arrangements required to get seating for a seeing eye dog on an airplane. Ordering food at a restaurant. Hailing a taxi.

This last example proved to be a real eye-opener. Taxis do not want dogs in their cars, despite federal laws protecting blind people with guide dogs. In order to get a cab, Gena has to hide in the background while another adult stops the cab and gets in the front seat. Then she and Brighton must sneak up to get in the back seat. Even then, the cabbies often declare that they will not travel with a dog. I saw this with my own eyes. Prejudice comes in many forms.

I learned a great deal from how Gena lives with glaucoma and blindness. Faced with repeated inconvenience and ignorance, she brings energy, enthusiasm, and joy to every moment and experience. Where many meet a diagnosis of glaucoma with despair, Gena has chosen to show herself (and whoever is watching) that anything is possible. As a skier, hang-glider, rock climber and scuba diver, perhaps it would be accurate to say that at least one thing which is not automatic for most of us is automatic for Gena: living her own vision of life to the fullest.

Exciting things are happening here at The Glaucoma Foundation. Our research funding will increase in 1996 as a result of an extremely successful year, thanks to all of our supporters. Our World Wide Web site is bringing inquiries and subscribers from all over the globe. New glaucoma screening programs are being developed. We are trying to do a great deal. Sometimes, the challenge seems like too much. At such times, Gena Harper provides the inspiration.

Let's do the impossible, together. Let's create a world without blindness.

## **The 9th Annual International Bachelor Ball**

The historic Rainbow Room provided the atmosphere, and Alex Donner and his orchestra the music, as The Glaucoma Foundation and 600 guests honored the 29 exceptional gentlemen who were the 1995 Bachelor Honorees. The evening was a lively salute, with Walter Longstreet Deane, the Honorary Chairman and a former Bachelor honoree; Lisa Anne Silhanek, Ball Chairperson; Lucy H. Coyle, Benefit Committee Chairperson (both women are former Singular Sensation honorees); and Randall I. Stempler, Chairman of the Advisory Board leading the applause for the Bachelors, who represented a wide range of professions. Among this year's honorees were Allan Block, Vice Chairman of Blade Communications; Dr. Salvatore Cumella; Count Christiano Grassi of Rome; Prince Rudolf Kniasse-Melikoff; Kevin McMahon, Senior Producer of Geraldo; and David Miller Steiner, an attorney with the New York City Corporation Counsel.

## **Making Progress Toward A World Without Blindness**

by Michele M. Burnett  
Director of Development,  
The Glaucoma Foundation

In reviewing the past year's achievements, it was gratifying to note that, as the size and scope of our programs expanded, so did the support of our many loyal friends and supporters. The Foundation saw increases in many areas of its fundraising efforts, especially the 9th Annual Black & White Ball (see article in this issue) whose gross income of over \$1 million represents the highest ever attained in the history of this event. The Wall Street community, the Ball's long-time base of support, deserves a great deal of thanks for this achievement, which will enable The Foundation to provide more research grants for improved treatment and, hopefully in our lifetime, a cure for glaucoma. The positive reaction to the 1st Glaucoma Golf Classic in May (see Summer 1995 issue of Eye to Eye) leads us to believe that we have another event that will quickly establish its own following and will provide additional critical funds for The Foundation's programs. The Glaucoma Foundation's fundraising goals for 1996 include increasing the funding for research, locating more sponsors to assist children for the Children's Right to Sight Program, expanding corporate support of our education programs, such as in-office glaucoma screenings, and providing individual donors with new ways to maximize their personal gifts. Thank you for your participation as we strive to achieve the goal of a world without blindness.

As part of The Foundation's ongoing effort to provide our supporters with information on the various types of Planned and Deferred Gift opportunities available, Ms. Ronni Davidowitz covers the importance of a Will as a way to ensure that your estate is distributed according to your wishes.

## **Why You Need A Will**

by Ronni G. Davidowitz  
Special Counsel - Trusts & Estates  
Rosenman & Colin LLP

When my daughter was in the second grade, she was given an assignment to make a sentence using the word "will" in it. I believe she was the only one in her class to use the word as a noun when she wrote, "You need a Will."

While I doubt that my daughter, at the tender age of seven, appreciated the significance of what she had written, the point still remains. On a basic level, if you have a Will you can, in most instances, control who gets your property upon your death. In the absence of a Will, the law takes over and provides an order of priority as to which individuals get your assets and how much. In New York, for example, if you die without a Will and are survived by a spouse and children, your spouse will get \$50,000 and one-half of your estate, with the remaining one-half being distributed outright to your children, regardless of their ages.

Therefore, even if you have a fairly small estate, you should have a Will, so that you, rather than the State, decide who gets what. The one exception to this element of control is a concept called a "right of election." You cannot disinherit a spouse except under very limited circumstances. A right of election is a right of the surviving spouse to take from a decedent's estate a portion of the estate and of certain other property passing outside of the Will.

If you have children, you may provide that the share or shares of your estate which are set aside for them are to be held in trust for them until they reach a certain age, at which point they get the funds outright. Thus, in the case of minor children, you avoid having testamentary guardians appointed for minor children or even having "adult" children obtain unfettered control over money at too young an age. In a testamentary guardian situation, a natural parent must petition the Court for appointment as the testamentary guardian over the assets set aside for the child and must seek court approval every time funds are withdrawn on behalf of the child.

Also, by the terms of a Will you can name an individual or individuals to act as guardians for your children if you should die before your children reach 18 years of age. You can also name an executor, who after your death will collect and value your assets, make all necessary tax filings, and wind up your affairs in accordance with your Will, and a

trustee, who will manage property for a beneficiary until the beneficiary reaches whatever age you have stated.

If you have a business, your Will can specially empower your executor (the person in charge of administering your estate) to keep the business going, to alter the form of the business or to liquidate the business upon your death. You can authorize your fiduciaries (i.e., your executors or trustees) to act as directors or officers and to receive compensation for so acting.

That, in a nutshell, is the very minimum that may be accomplished by having a Will. However, as estates increase in size (fundamentally as they grow beyond \$600,000) properly drafted Wills can help reduce the impact of estate taxes. To appreciate this, a basic lesson on estate taxes is in order.

The United States has a 3-part approach to the tax on the transfer of wealth Ñ an estate tax, a gift tax and a generation-skipping transfer tax. The estate tax is generally a tax based upon the value of all property, wherever located, owned by a decedent at the time of death, less certain deductions. A gift tax is based on the value of the gift at the time the property is transferred. The donor, not the person receiving the gift, bears the burden of the tax. The generation-skipping transfer tax is a tax imposed at a maximum estate tax rate in effect at the time of the transfer (currently 55%) on property transferred to an individual two or more generations below the transferor. Each individual has available a lifetime one million dollar exemption from the generation-skipping transfer tax.

Under current law, the Federal estate and gift tax rates are the same, or "unified." The rates start at 18% for the first \$10,000 of transfers and go to 55% for transfers over \$3,000,000. There is an additional 5% rate increase on transfers between \$10,000,000 and \$21,040,000. There are credits available to reduce the estate and gift tax rate, the most significant of which is the Federal unified credit of \$192,800, the sum equal to the tax on a transfer of \$600,000. Thus, generally speaking, a \$600,000 taxable estate would not incur any Federal estate tax, although other state estate taxes may apply.

The \$600,000 unified transfer tax credit is available to each individual to be used either during life or at death. An estate planner's role is to help you take advantage of the \$600,000 credit so as to be able to pass property down to family members free of federal estate taxes. Without careful planning, it is possible to lose the credit. Specifically, such a loss could come about if, for example, by the terms of a Will all property is to be distributed to the decedent's surviving spouse. In this example, the loss of the unified credit is occasioned by the fact that the entire property passing to the surviving spouse is sheltered from immediate estate taxation by a full marital deduction. Thus, if a decedent leaves no property which is subject to immediate taxation at the time of his death, no portion of the decedent's unified credit may be used to enable property to pass to the next generation free of estate tax.

Generally, property which passes from one spouse to another receives a full marital deduction for the value of the property passing to the surviving spouse, resulting in a zero

taxable estate. However, this property will be included in the surviving spouse's estate to the extent it is on hand at the death of the surviving spouse and it cannot pass to other family members free of a transfer tax. To avoid this situation, the first spouse to die can reduce the gift to his spouse by \$600,000 and still avoid a Federal estate tax. The \$600,000 worth of property can be distributed to other family members or be held in a trust for the surviving spouse's life. By setting up such an estate plan, \$1.2 million (\$600,000 for each spouse) can be sheltered from Federal estate tax. One thing to note, if your spouse is not a United States citizen, there is no marital deduction available on a transfer of property to him. Advice should be sought as to how to minimize the estate tax impact.

An important point to consider with regard to the \$600,000 credit is that an estate planner will help you to create a testamentary plan to best utilize the \$600,000 credit. However, the creative genius may be thwarted if there are either little or no assets passing by Will or if one spouse's estate is so much larger than the other's and, as a result, the second spouse has less than \$600,000 to shelter. Bear in mind that one's assets may pass testamentarily, that is by Will, or they may pass non-testamentarily, by operation of law (such as life insurance, jointly held property and retirement benefits). Assets solely in a decedent's name without a designated beneficiary pass by Will; whereas, by example, assets that are in joint names with right of survivorship pass automatically upon death to the survivor. Accordingly, it is important when discussing your plans with an advisor to come prepared with a list of all your assets, the approximate value of such assets and the name or names in which the assets are held. Armed with such information, an advisor can make recommendations, if for example, it is necessary split up some jointly-owned property. There is no Federal gift tax on transfers between husband and wife, both of whom are U.S. citizens.

Finally, just a few more thoughts for you to consider. Testamentary gifts to charity get a full charitable deduction, thereby reducing a taxable estate. Annual gifts by a donor to a donee of \$10,000 or under are not subject to gift tax. A wife may join her husband (gift split) and, together, annually give \$20,000 to an individual or individuals without incurring a gift tax. Life insurance proceeds from a life insurance policy which has been transferred to a properly drafted life insurance trust, or which is purchased by a trustee of such a life insurance trust, are not included in a decedent's estate for estate tax purposes. With respect to a transfer of an existing policy to a life insurance trust, the transferor must survive three years from the date of the transfer in order to have the proceeds excluded from her estate.

I have thrown a number of ideas at you and hopefully, I have started you thinking about your own needs. While I have only just skimmed the surface, I hope that this has helped to make you aware of some of the issues you should consider and some of the options available to you.

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Remember: Each state has its own rules and regulations regarding estate taxes. Please consult an attorney licensed to practice in your state who is familiar with the law regarding wills when you are ready to write your will.

## **Calendar of Upcoming Events 1996**

### **Singular Sensations 1996**

Friday, April 19, 1996

[location changed to The Racquet and Tennis Club]

### **The 2nd Annual Glaucoma Golf Classic**

Monday, June 3, 1996

Marriott Windwatch Hotel & Golf Club

Hauppauge, Long Island

Tee-Off at 12:30 p.m.

Pre-Tee-Off Lunch and Post-Play Reception

For information call: (212) 504-1902

### **The 10th Annual Black and White Ball**

Wednesday, December 4, 1996 or,

Thursday, December 12, 1996

Location and details to be announced

## **A Thank You to Our Donors**

The Glaucoma Foundation gratefully acknowledges the following individuals, corporations, and foundations who have made a substantial contribution to support our many programs since July 1, 1995. We appreciate the support of all of our donors and will continue to acknowledge their support in each issue of Eye to Eye.

George & Judy Aquila  
Aquila Management Corporation  
Mr. Jim Byrnes, Smith Barney  
Cantor Fitzgerald  
Cantor Fitzgerald Foundation  
Mr. & Mrs. Joseph M. Cohen  
Cowen & Company  
Mr. & Mrs. Arthur Cramers  
CS First Boston  
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Gregory K. Harmon, M.D.  
Herzog, Heine & Geduld Inc.  
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Mr. William K. Jones, Jones & Associates  
Mr. & Mrs. Joseph M. La Motta  
Ms. Elizabeth Larson  
Mr. Martin R. Lewis  
Mr. Howard W. Lutnick  
Market Data Corporation  
Mr. Louis Marx, Jr.  
Morgan Stanley & Co. Incorporated  
NatWest Securities  
The Streslin Foundation, Inc.  
Mr. & Mrs. Charles Zion

## 1995 Tribute Card Program

The Glaucoma Foundation is pleased to acknowledge the following Tribute Gifts that were received in 1995. These gifts not only provide valuable financial support for The Foundation's many projects, but also recognize the special individuals in the lives of our

### *Gifts in Memory of Those Who Have Passed Away*

#### **Honoring**

#### **From**

Aunt of Fern Berger	Mr. and Mrs. Brian Frasco
Al Corwin	Howard M. Ialberg
	Leo and Estelle Bloch
Shirley Diskin	Bettye Mann and family
Mother of Eileen Dubin	Mr. and Mrs. Brian Frasco
Sylvia Feldman	Mr. and Mrs. Irving Goldman and family
Samuel Field	The Brown Foundation
Natalie Giddins	Mr. and Mrs. Fred Silberman
Milton Harrell	Peggy Sue Arnold
Grace Hickey	Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide
Judy Katz	Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon M. Siegel
Yolanda La Scala	Sharyn Ferretti
Fred Mamay	Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon M. Siegel
Harriet McHugh	Sharyn Ferretti
Julie Mouracade	Mr. and Mrs. Paul Wunder Mr. and Mrs. Robert Wunder
Sophie Scheingold	Sheila Evers
Tessie Schiralli	Janice Galler
Frieda Siegel	Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon M. Siegel
Jack Small	Rosalyn Baum and friends
Irving Sorin	Janice Galler
Naomi Stranhan	Captain Harold W. Feder, USN Ret.
Peggy Treacy	Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Yurkofsky
Michel Urban	Patricia Blumberg and family
Ruth Yankovitch	Mr. and Mrs. Sheldon M. Siegel
Madeline Zullo	Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Zullo Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Lee

*Gifts for Other Occasions*

**Honoring**

**From**

Ms. Rita DeCre  
on the occasion of  
her 75th Birthday

Mrs. Margo Wistreich

Mr. and Mrs. William Schlameus  
in honor of their  
25th Wedding Anniversary

Mr. and Mrs. Bernard Schlameus

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Please call The Foundation's Development Office at (212) 504-1902 for information on how to participate in this program

# **Now You See It, Now You Don't**

## **a magician encounters glaucoma**

by Ben Robinson

As a magician I prize the ability to see clearly. As a child I saw the Great Dutch magician Fred Kaps. He blew my little mind. Since that experience, I have always feared losing my sight. What would happen if I could not see such wonderful magic?! Now, they say that magic has to be believed to be seen. A paradox, but true. However, even if you don't believe in magic, it is still nice to see something impossible that gives hope once in a while.

The great vaudeville magician and legendary writer on magic, Jean Hugard, spent the last years of his life completely blind. One magician named Burling Hull, known as the Edison of Magic, who lived well into his 90's, also was robbed of his sight at the end. But the most famous tragedy to strike those who practice abracadabra befell the genius magician, Karl Germain. Blindness interrupted a stage career so elegant that Houdini was envious of Germain's show. When Germain lost his sight, he became a lawyer and always took a young companion to magic shows to tell him what was being done. Magicians typify conquering blindness. Their acts of "second sight" with "x-ray eyes" (where they are blindfolded completely, yet see perfectly well) are baffling and inspirational. The great mind reader, Ted Annemann (famous for catching bullets in his teeth), performed a blindfolded walk in the 1930's in New York. He properly delivered a letter, even though the address was not on the envelope, and he was completely blindfolded.

I began volunteering with The Glaucoma Foundation in late 1994. I attended the Black & White Ball at the World Financial Center Winter Garden. After learning that glaucoma was not only easily preventable, but rampant among certain ethnic groups, I immediately had my eyes checked the very next day. A simple, painless test assured me my vision was fine, and I was not in danger of losing my most precious sense.

As magicians, we learn many valuable lessons; among them: "Just because you don't see it, doesn't mean it is not there." This is called the First Law of Illusion. Basically, if you don't see a wire holding a floating object, doesn't mean it is not there. But, when the magician passes a solid hoop over the floating object, the notion of a suspension cable is dismissed and the very delicate element of wonder enters our lives. To feel wonder from illusions, we are intellectually dependent on our sight.

Glaucoma is not a killer, but it can rob us of many pleasant experiences. If the creation of impossibilities on the stage reminds audiences of anything, we are reminded that the impossible can sometimes be possible. Glaucoma is not only possible to beat, it is preventable through education and routine examinations.

Wiping out glaucoma is not a case of now you see it, now you don't. It is a cause for serious research that is no illusion. The Glaucoma Foundation works to ensure that the magic of sight is left intact.

*Ben Robinson has been a magician for 20 years. His new show, "Ghost," opened December 6, 1995, at the Mo Roc N Cafe in Seattle, playing as part of Sublime Wednesdays.*