

NEWSIGHT



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ASED patient and corneal transplant recipient Donnie Coker, second from right, with fellow Lions of Fort Pierce. Also pictured are Matthew Samuel, Crystal Samuel, wife Carol Coker, and Cheryl Nolte.

Lion Donnie Coker on the Benefit of Autologous Serum Eye Drops

Donnie Coker is a lot of things: husband, father, Lion, cancer survivor, retired nurse, wine enthusiast, and Red Sox fan. He is also closely connected to Florida Lions Eye Bank's work, as a corneal transplant recipient and former autologous serum eye drop patient. Mara Budnetz, Director of Public Relations for Florida Lions Eye Bank, met Mr. Coker at a Lions meeting, where she was sharing information about the organization's autologous serum eye drop (ASED) program, which had launched the previous year. By coincidence, Donnie, a former user of ASED, was in the audience. He was courageous enough to stand up in front of the crowd and share his positive, life-changing experience using this product, which was a far more powerful testimony than anything Florida Lions Eye Bank could say. This is Donnie's story.

Donnie Coker was diagnosed with leukemia in 2008, when he was 48 years old. His cancer diagnosis came about in an unusual way: he experienced sudden and rapidly progressing vision loss. In August of 2008, he saw an ophthalmologist, who suspected that his vision loss might be due to leukemia. He was formally diagnosed with the disease at the end of that month. Sadly, by October of 2008, Donnie Coker was blind. *(Continued on page 2)*

An ASED Patient Shares His Story

(continued from cover)

At the time, Donnie and his wife Carol were living in Pembroke Pines, Florida. He traveled across the state to Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa for treatment. In January of 2010, Donnie received a lifesaving bone marrow transplant from a donor he'd never met before, a woman who had generously volunteered to save the life of a person in need. Shortly after his bone marrow transplant, Donnie was declared cancer-free! Unfortunately, the treatment that spared his life caused him to suffer from graft-versus-host disease, or GvHD.

About half of all bone marrow transplant recipients experience some degree of GvHD. A majority of these patients experience ocular symptoms, which include blurry vision, foreign body sensation, severe light sensitivity, dry eyes and burning eye pain. Donnie's doctors attempted to treat his symptoms with saline eye drops, surgical tear duct plugs, prescription eyedrops, and steroid therapy. "I tried everything!" said Donnie. "None of it worked." Donnie's ocular GvHD symptoms were severe. "It felt like... imagine if you went to the beach and picked up a handful of sand and rubbed it into your eyes. Except this didn't go away. It was a severe irritation that was unrelenting, around the clock."

Donnie's oncologist recognized this debilitating side effect of his bone marrow transplant, and referred him to Dr. Victor Perez at Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. Dr. Perez, a cornea specialist, was working to treat a number of a bone marrow transplant patients who were experiencing symptoms similar to Donnie's. Dr. Perez recommended that Donnie try a treatment he'd never heard of before: autologous serum eye drops.

Autologous serum eye drops are a kind of biological therapy made from the patient's own blood serum and sterile, preservative-free saline solution. Blood serum contains proteins and

growth factors that can help heal the surface of the eye. Unlike pharmaceutical eye drops, ASED cannot cause burning, stinging, irritation, or redness, and cannot provoke an allergic reaction. This makes them suitable for use in patients like Donnie who have severe eye pain and irritation. However, ASED are labor-intensive to produce, as they are custom-made on demand for each patient. ASED are also not covered by insurance. Finally, because ASED are made from a patient's blood, blood must be drawn from the patient for each new batch of ASED.

This treatment, now produced by Florida Lions Eye Bank in a dedicated facility, was at the time produced in several laboratories as scheduling permitted. Due to the small scale of production, getting ASED was rather inconvenient. Donnie stated, "The eye drops were only being made on Tuesdays at Bascom Palmer Plantation. So every two months, on a Tuesday, I had to come to Bascom to have my blood drawn. The eye drops were made on site, which was good, but there was about 3 hour wait before they were ready." Donnie used ASED for about two years. "If you add it all up, that was a lot of waiting."

But the wait was worth it. Before starting on ASED, Donnie recalled, "I was in constant pain." But after a single dose of ASED, Donnie noticed an improvement in his symptoms. As he continued to use ASED, Donnie's symptoms continued to improve. "I almost couldn't believe it," he recalls. "Nothing else had worked." It took several months before optimal effects were achieved, but finally, Donnie's terrible discomfort due to GvHD was relieved.

For the next two years, Donnie continued to use ASED. As time passed, his GvHD resolved, and he no longer needed the treatment. However, the ocular GvHD had caused so much damage to one of his corneas that he needed a corneal transplant. Dr. Perez performed the procedure, which preserved his eye. (Continued on next page)

"I had tried everything. None of it worked."

Florida Lions Eye Bank 2018 Open House & Trip to Wynwood Arts District

Florida Lions Eye Bank staff and guests in front of one of the famous Wynwood Walls. Thank you to all those who attended the 2018 Open House! We look forward to seeing you next year.



In March of 2018, Florida Lions Eye Bank hosted its annual Open House. This event, held every spring, invites Lions from throughout the Multiple District, as well as Bascom Palmer physicians and supporters from the community, to tour Florida Lions Eye Bank's facilities. Attendees visited one of three of Florida Lions Eye Bank's working laboratories. One tour group went to the Ophthalmic Biophysics Center, a research facility sponsored in part by Florida Lions Eye Bank. A second group toured the Cornea Laboratory, the "heart" of the eye bank, where tissue is processed, stored, and distributed for transplant. The third group visited the Pathology Laboratory, South Florida's only facility dedicated to the study of ophthalmic specimens, patient diagnosis, and physician education. "It was great to see all the fascinating work that was taking place," remarked one guest.

As in past years, 2018's Open House included a presentation in the Berrocal Auditorium with speeches by Executive Director Elizabeth Fout-Caraza and Medical Director Sander R. Dubovy, MD. An on-site barbecue took place on the Retter Patio, with music by a live DJ and a door prize drawing. But the biggest change is that, for its Open House this year, Florida Lions Eye Bank broke tradition and went on a field trip to Miami's famous Wynwood Arts District. After the tours and lunch ended, guests boarded a bus and traveled to the nearby Wynwood neighborhood, known for its many art galleries, graffiti-style street art, murals, and block parties. Guests were free to explore the area on their own, taking in some of Miami's unique and diverse culture. "The tour of Wynwood Walls was fabulous!" said Jane, one Lion in attendance.

(Continued from page 2) These days, Donnie is doing well. He and his wife live in Port St. Lucie with their two Yorkshire terriers. Their grown sons are both Naval Officers. Donnie volunteers with the Federation of the Blind, and manages membership for the Fort Pierce Lions Club. He has survived leukemia; his bone marrow transplant is considered to have been as successful as possible. He takes prescription eye drops for moderate dry eye, which manage his symptoms effectively. He no longer needs autologous serum eye drops.

Although he's no longer an ASED patient, Donnie is an outspoken advocate for this therapy, and knows more people could access it if it was paid for by insurance plans. "It just works," he declared. "The effects are proven. Insurance should cover ASED." Donnie recommends that ASED patients contact their insurance companies to describe how this treatment has worked for them. "Bombard them with your testimonials," he suggested. "Everyone— patients, doctors, insurance companies, eye banks— should know about the importance of autologous serum eye drops."



Technician Katrina producing ASED in Florida Lions Eye Bank's laboratory. This product will be delivered to a patient within a day.





Top:
Staff of Florida Lions
Eye Bank & family.

Bottom:
Donor families
celebrating
their loved ones'
donations.



On Saturday, March 17, over 230 people gathered at Flamingo Gardens for the fourth annual Donor Family Celebration. This event celebrated the legacy of the 938 people who became eye donors to Florida Lions Eye Bank in 2017. Families and loved ones of these selfless individuals were invited to an afternoon of fun, remembrance, and reflection. The event featured lunch, music, arts and crafts, face painting, and a butterfly release ceremony dedicated to the memory of their loved ones. Donor families also had the opportunity to tour Flamingo Gardens, a lush 60-acre wildlife sanctuary and botanical gardens in Davie, FL.

The 938 South Floridians who became eye donors in 2017 provided corneas to 1,352 recipients, and 522 specimens for medical research. Over 60% of these donors had chosen to register as eye, organ and tissue donors on their driver's licenses. Florida Lions Eye Bank is deeply grateful for the gifts these selfless individuals gave, and our staff was honored to meet so many people whose loved ones restored the beauty of sight. To register as an eye, organ, and tissue donor, visit www.donatelifeflorida.org.

Urbano Zea was only 49 years old when he passed away unexpectedly in April of 2018. Despite their grief, Urbano's family honored his wishes to become an eye and tissue donor, as he had designated on his driver's license. Urbano's eye donation restored sight to two teenaged patients. This is remarkable, as most corneal transplant recipients are older adults.

As an adult, Urbano worked in agricultural businesses in the United States and Mexico. He enjoyed traveling and spending time with his family. Urbano was married to his wife for 27 years; together, they had four children. He is remembered every day by his family and friends as a loving, devoted husband and father; a dear son and brother, an Olympic swimmer; and a businessman and entrepreneur. To two other people— young adults whom Urbano never met, but whose lives he touched deeply— Urbano is remembered as the person who gave them the gift of sight.

Urbano himself was a remarkable man. Born and raised in Mexico, he was one of four children, three girls and a boy. A talented athlete, Urbano excelled at swimming. As a young man, he set new records for freestyle swimming, and was invited to join the Mexican National Youth Team. After being named National Youth Champion in several events, Urbano qualified for the Olympics. In 1988, he represented Mexico at the Olympic Games in Seoul, South Korea, where he participated in multiple swimming events. Urbano's athletic achievements earned him a scholarship to the University of New Mexico.

Thanks to Urbano's incredible generosity, these two young people will move forward into adulthood with their sight restored. His inspirational story is just one of tens of thousands! Urbano is one of over 46,000 individuals who have become eye donors to Florida Lions Eye Bank. Behind every corneal transplant surgery, there is a story like Urbano's: a story of a life filled with adventure, family, friendship, love, and finally, the priceless gift of eye donation that touches countless lives for years to come.





In this newsletter, Florida Lions Eye Bank has told you a lot about what we've been up to. But what about you? What have you been up to? Yes, you, the person reading this! Are you a corneal transplant recipient? Are you the loved one of an eye donor? Maybe you're a supporter in our community, or a surgeon, or a member of a Lions club. Whoever you are, we're interested in learning more about you and your connection to Florida Lions Eye Bank. And we'd love to see what you see.

That's why we're calling out to all artists— and we think everyone can be an artist— and asking you to share your art with us. Florida Lions Eye Bank would love to spotlight individuals who are involved with or impacted by our work, and what better way than through sharing the beauty of sight?

Here's how it works. Send us a picture of something you created, or something you love looking at. This can be anything from a photo of something meaningful to you, to a child's finger painting, to a digital image of a sculpture you made. And include a little bit about yourself: who you are, and how you're connected to Florida Lions Eye Bank. We'll feature your art and your stories on our social media, printed material, and website. We may even print someone's art on our yearly holiday card!

The only rule is that you can't pass off another person's art as your own. So please submit only original photos and digital images of things you've created, or work that the artist has given you permission to share. Please send all submissions, and any questions, to info@fleeb.org.

Thank you— yes, you!— for being who you are. And thank you for being part of Florida Lions Eye Bank's mission to *restore the beauty of sight*.

General Donations

Georgette Alexander	Henry Halko	Lou Penzi, Jr.
Amazon Smile Foundation	Brenda Harmelin	Maria Perez
Erma Amrein	Michael Harmelin	Gloria Plastow
Manuel Arvesu	Mary S. Hartzell	Rollins Reiter
Gerardo Basail	Margaret Hinely	Renaissance Charitable Foundation, Inc.
James Brauss, OD	Patricia Hubner	Irene Reyes
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Kathy Corser	Luke Leitz	Fanny Santo
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Edith Davidson	William Lillycrop	Carrie Scott
William Davis	Joyce Loaiza	Gail Simmons
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Elaine Dubovy	Linda Lubitz-Boone	Leona Spector
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Lions Clubs

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 Boca Raton Lions Club
 Bradenton Lions Club
 Crawfordville Lions Club
 Englewood Lions Club
 Everglades Lions Club
 Fort Pierce Lions Club
 Ft. Lauderdale Lions Club
 High Point Lions Club
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 Miami Colombian Lions Club
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 Navarre Lions Club
 North Port Lions Club
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 Palm Bay Happy Lions Club
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Florida Lions Eye Bank
900 NW 17th Street # 348
Miami, FL 33136

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New Board of Directors Installed at 2018 Gala



*Medical Director
Sander R. Dubovy,
MD, with incoming
President Norma
Callahan, PDG, and
Executive Director
Elizabeth Fout- Caraza*

On June 2, 2018, Florida Lions Eye Bank celebrated the installation of its board of directors for the 2018-2019 year. The gala celebration took place at the Signature Grand in Davie, FL. Over 80 guests were treated to live jazz music, played by a quartet of University of Miami graduate students. The evening also featured a raffle and a silent auction to raise funds for Florida Lions Eye Bank.

Immediate Past President George Letakis, PDG, gave a heartfelt speech thanking Florida Lions Eye Bank, and his fellow Lions on the board of directors, for the opportunity to serve. Medical Director Sander R. Dubovy, MD, received the first annual Victor T. Curtin award for his dedicated service to

the eye bank. Lion Larry Schiff was presented with the Ross Carr Memorial Award in recognition of his devotion to Florida Lions Eye Bank's mission. Finally, incoming President, Norma Callahan, PDG, pledged to lead Florida Lions Eye Bank in new and exciting directions in the coming year.

Florida Lions Eye Bank holds an Installation Gala every year in June to celebrate the appointment of the incoming board of directors. If you would like to receive an invitation to next year's Installation Gala, please email Florida Lions Eye Bank at info@fleeb.org to be added to our mailing list for special events.



*The newly installed Florida Lions Eye Bank
2018-2019 Board of Directors*