

THEIR MISSION: **REDUCE SUFFERING**

Center For Sight Foundation gives back with 100 free vision restoration surgeries



Staff Report

PHOTOS PROVIDED BY CENTER FOR SIGHT

Center For Sight held its annual Mission Cataract event July 25 and Aug. 1 in its state-of-the-art surgery center.

Cataract surgeons Dr. David Shoemaker, Dr. William Lahners, Dr. Joshua Kim and Dr. William Soscia performed free life-changing cataract surgeries for more than nine hours.

Center For Sight is one of only 21 practices in the United States that offer this free service to uninsured patients, and has been committed to performing vision restoration for underprivileged community members for more than 25 years.

“Our mission is to ensure that no one suffers visual loss due to a surgically treatable condition because of an inability to pay,” said Dr. Shoemaker, founder and director of cataract and lens replacement surgery at Center For Sight. “Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness in the world and we are committed to changing lives through vision restoration. There is no greater gift than the gift of sight, which is why we continue to offer this program for our most impoverished community members each year.”

2018 Mission Cataract recipients

There is no way to prevent cataract formation, a condition where the lens of the eye becomes clouded and eventually results in vision loss. Surgical treatment is necessary to replace the clouded lens and restore lost sight.

Applicants approved to receive treatment in 2018 come from diverse walks of life. There were 100 surgeries during the 2018 event; a number that has remained consistent over the years.

Maureen Atkinson, a West Palm Beach resident, was a full-time caregiver to a blind woman when, in 2017, she realized that her own sight was deteriorating. Following her eye exam, she learned that she had developed cataracts.

“I don’t leave my apartment; I’m afraid to go anywhere,” Atkinson said, referencing the effect that cataracts had on her daily life. It is Atkinson’s hope that she will now be able to do the many things she enjoys: provide for herself, drive and pursue her passion of photographing her 12 grandchildren. She is most looking forward to being able to see all of her family again.

“To me, photography is your heritage; it’s what you leave behind,” Atkinson said. “It is so important for me to take pictures of my grandchildren and children.”

Patricia King, a resident of Bradenton, is ecstatic to be given the gift of restored vision. As the owner of an equestrian center and the full-time

Dr. David Shoemaker operates on a Mission Cataract patient.



caregiver for her 94-year-old mother, she is grateful for the opportunity to “get her life back.” Unexpected events led to a financially crippling downfall; in 2015, a tornado hit her beloved equestrian center, but that was just the beginning of a series of financial misfortunes. Realizing her vision was failing, King was devastated to learn that her vision loss was due to cataracts.

Before surgery, King said she could no longer distinguish between her horses. They were just a blur. She couldn’t see the grass on the ground or use a computer. She was “essentially blind.”

Following surgery, King hopes to rebuild her equestrian center and return to school for her doctorate so she can continue with

her dietitian consulting venture, a formerly thriving business, before cataracts took hold of her sight.

Aaron French, a cataract and glaucoma patient from Fruitland Park, Florida, said he was a network engineer before he went legally blind.

"Prior to surgery with Dr. Kim, I had 20/400 vision," French said. "It was so bad I couldn't work or drive. I looked far and wide for help and there was nothing out there, and then I found this program. What they're doing is an absolute blessing. It's given me my life back."

Following the surgery with Dr. Kim, French dropped to 20/15 vision within a week in his right eye. "It couldn't have gone to the farther end of the spectrum," French said. "It's just a blessing."

French's case is a unique one, in that he also had the Glaukos iStent inserted at the time of his cataract surgery. The iStent is an innovative device used for those with glaucoma that are undergoing cataract surgery. It helps control eye pressure and decreases the patient's dependence on glaucoma medications. The iStent is the smallest implantable device in humans and normally costs thousands of dollars. iStent manufacturer Glaukos generously donated iStents to all 2018 Mission Cataract

patients in need, significantly enhancing French's quality of life.

Another Mission Cataract patient, Gail McPherson of Bradenton, says she is "just incredibly grateful to you all, and to the company who donated (the lenses), for the chance to keep my eyeballs. This is going to be a life-changer for me and I'm more grateful than I can express."

The desires and dreams of Center For Sight's Mission Cataract patients are simple ones: to see a grandchild's smile, resume a beloved hobby, or to go to the grocery store without requiring help. Center For Sight has been committed to performing vision restoration for underprivileged community members for more than 25 years, practice administrators say.

"Our mission is to ensure that no one suffers visual loss due to a surgically treatable condition because of an inability to pay," Dr. Shoemaker said. "Center For Sight partners with multiple companies in order to continue providing this service. Donations to the Center For Sight Foundation cover the cost to purchase medications, surgical supplies and protective post-operative glasses. This year, manufacturer Johnson & Johnson donated all the intraocular lenses.

Partnerships necessary to continue Mission Cataract

Not only do the Center For Sight surgeons and Center For Sight Foundation donors participate in providing this service, but the premier laser technology company, Lensar, Inc., of Orlando, donated the use of its advanced Lensar laser system this year.

To ensure ongoing funding for the annual Mission Cataract program, Dr. Shoemaker earlier formed the Center For Sight Foundation, a donor-advised fund of the Gulf Coast Community Foundation. Every dollar submitted to the foundation is put toward the annual Mission Cataract charitable initiative, in order to purchase medications, surgical supplies, protective post-operative glasses and the intraocular lens to be placed in patients' eyes at the



time of surgery.

In addition, Center For Sight has partnered with Operation Sight, a national program through the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgery Foundation, in order to expand its reach in Southwest Florida and nationwide. The goal of Operation Sight is to build a network of volunteer organizations that provide care to Americans unable to access or afford cataract surgery.

Application process

Potential patients must complete an application and meet specific criteria to be eligible for Mission Cataract. Applicants must be United States citizens, have a confirmed diagnosis of cataracts, live at or below the poverty level set by the United States Department of Health and Human Services and be without Medicare, Medicaid or third-party insurance coverage.

Applications can be found online at CFSFoundation.org.

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