SHARING THE Vision

By Suzi Wirtz, CAE

Picture this, if you will. Your eyes have been bothering you lately. Street signs appear fuzzy, and you’re squinting to see the computer screen more clearly. You schedule an appointment with an eye doctor who determines that you do, in fact, need glasses. He gives you a prescription, you scan the vast selection of frames in his office and choose a trendy one that complements your hair and skin tone. Two weeks later, the glasses are ready and you’re a new person. You can see clearly.

Now picture this, if you can. Your eyes have been bothering you lately. There are no street signs along the dirt roads lining your tiny farmtown in Mexico, and you’ve never used a computer. An eye exam costs as much as you make in one month and there is but one eye doctor serving the hundreds of thousands of people in surrounding towns. Two weeks later, you hear about a “mission” coming to town — a group of volunteers who will provide free eye exams and free eye-glasses.

These volunteers are members of Lions Clubs International. And they’ve been bringing the gift of sight to people in need for more than 80 years.

It all started on June 30, 1925, when Helen Keller, renowned activist then in the midst of her campaign for the rights for the blind, addressed the Lions Clubs International Convention in Cedar Point, Ohio. As keynote speaker at that meeting, she challenged Lions to become "knights of the blind."

At the time, LCI was just eight years old. Founder Melvin Jones was a Chicago business leader, and he firmly believed that local business clubs should expand their horizons from purely professional concerns to the betterment of their communities and the world at large. However, while LCI boasted the general mission statement to “serve society,” there was no specific purpose for the clubs. At that convention in 1925, Lions were searching for a purpose. Keller provided it to them. She stated in her speech, "If you care, if we can make the people of this great country care, the blind will indeed triumph over blindness. I appeal to you Lions, you who have your sight, your hearing, you who are strong and brave and kind. Will you not constitute yourselves Knights of the Blind in this crusade against darkness?"

The answer was a resounding, "Yes!" and, consequently, LCI obtained the focus for which it has become most widely known.

Before LCI members left Cedar Point, they voted to adopt sight conservation and work for the blind as a major service activity. Prior to Keller’s speech, individual Lions clubs had been working on behalf of the blind through a variety of means. With the newly defined and focused mission, they were able to embark on additional ventures. For instance, Lions in California purchased a press for a Braille publishing house and Lions
Lions Clubs Vision Initiatives

SightFirst
Lions' SightFirst program was launched in 1989 to battle preventable blindness. Through this wildly ambitious, yet even more wildly successful, initiative, Lions have prevented blindness by supporting cataract surgeries, helping to build or expand eye hospitals and clinics, distributing sight-saving medication and training eye care professionals. To date, the program has provided $202 million in grant funding for sight-related projects.

Lions restored sight to seven million people through cataract surgeries, prevented serious vision loss for 20 million people and improved eye care services for hundreds of millions. The mission of the program is to significantly reduce preventable and reversible blindness worldwide but particularly in developing countries where 90 percent of avoidable blindness exists.

Typical SightFirst projects focus on strengthening of eye care infrastructures and eye delivery systems, training of eye care workers and related human resource personnel, and intervening against the major blinding diseases through scale-treatment initiatives.

Campaign SightFirst II, started in 2005, will enable Lions to expand the extraordinary work of SightFirst. The goal is to raise at least $150 million to continue to prevent blindness and restore sight. Lynch says, "So far Lions have raised more than $67 million. The goal of Campaign SightFirst II is to prevent the world's blind population from doubling in the next 15 years, from 37 million to 75 million. This is a very critical issue since 80 out of 10 cases of blindness can be prevented or cured, if caught in time."

Recycle for Sight Month
Though Lions Clubs around the world collect used eyeglasses throughout the year, the May month designated by LCI as the specific time to focus on this initiative. Collection boxes exist in neighborhoods everywhere. Many stores are donation boxes or permit members to hold donation drives at their entrances. Several clubs have converted old post office drop boxes into eyeglass collection boxes. Libraries, post offices, places of worship and schools are another great place for donation box sites. Optometrists or ophthalmologists often assist by putting collection boxes in their offices so that patients can recycle the old pair as they pick-up their new glasses.

May as Recycle for Sight Month is heavily promoted by the headquarters office as well as in each individual club.

Promoting the program is important. LCI encourages members to post flyers and posters throughout the community and to use a community newsletter to promote Recycle for Sight Month.

In addition, May boasts "White Cane Week" (May 13-19). The familiar white cane with a red band at the bottom is an important mobility tool used by blind and visually impaired persons in many countries. This simple device was invented in 1930 by Lion George A. Bonham of Peoria, Ill.

World Sight Day
Lions World Sight Day was created in 1998 to spotlight the importance of eradicating preventable blindness and improving sight. An increasing number of Lions clubs are using this occasion to collect eyeglasses, conduct vision and diabetes screenings and plan educational programs to inform their communities about the importance of sight and diseases such as diabetes that can impact sight.

THE WORLD'S LARGEST EYEGLASS COLLECTION
Lions Clubs International celebrates its 90th birthday this summer and its International convention will be held July 2-6 in Chicago, the city in which the organization was founded. During the meeting, host committee chairperson, Dan O'Reilly, and his team are asking the Lions of Illinois to make an extra effort in collecting recycled eyeglasses and to bring them to the convention. They are hoping to make it the world's largest eyeglass collection.

O'Reilly says, "We have a Lions Night at US Cellular Field, and the White Sox are helping with the drive. We're working with the city to possibly collect them at the Taste of Chicago. We want to bring attention to the Lions and what we do with used eyeglasses. We want to show people how they can help someone see things they've never seen before, a simple thing we take for granted."

If you want to donate your old glasses, Peter Lynch says, "Look in your closets, drawers and glove compartments to see if you have glasses, including sunglasses, that you no longer need. Look for Lions recycling boxes, or contact your local Lions club. All types of eyeglasses and sunglasses, prescription and re-purposable. Children's eyeglasses are especially needed. For more information, visit www.lionsclubs.org."
lives of such a broad-reaching project. They are:

1. Helping to preserve sight by providing glasses through the association's infrastructure.
2. Promoting eyeglass collection, processing and distribution.
3. Reinforcing Lions identity education with eyeglass recycling.
4. Publicizing Lions involvement in this activity and improving record keeping.
5. Promoting communications among centers and expansion of Lions eyeglass recycling.

The committee saw there was strength in numbers, and it didn’t take much to convince the board. A few months after the resolution was adopted, the first two pilot locations were established as the Indiana and California Lions Eyeglass Recycling Centers.

"What happened is what usually happens with Lions individual clubs," explains Debbie O’Malley, a coordinator in the health and children’s services department for LCI. “Members from clubs that have success with a program, may bring it to the next level after having obtained support from the district and multiple districts. Once the support is there, the International Board of Directors considers the proposal and can adopt the program as an official service activity.”

Individual Lions Clubs are self-directed and member-driven. While there are approximately 290 staff members in the headquarters office in Oak Brook, Ill., there are more than 1.3 million members worldwide who serve in 45,000 clubs. Lions Clubs are found in all continents and geographies.

“Our members are the backbone of the ground,” says Melitta Outright, manager in the public relations department. “They know what’s going on, they’re responsible and we appreciate that.”

The 15 recycling centers we found around the world (see sidebar) operate independently, but do receive public relations material as well as administrative support from the Oak Brook staff. The LCI Web site contains a section devoted to the recycling centers, including links to profiles, FAQs and a measure to download and print a poster, a brochure and a manual titled, “A Guide for Starting and Operating a Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center.”

"We operate from the opposite side of the world from Chicago, yet find, through the Internet, that we are operating in the same building as the international headquarters," says Ken Leonard, chairperson and chief executive for LIONS Recycle for Sight Australia, Inc. "The Oak Brook office has a team dedicated to assisting our Centre with any information, contacts, investigations or other aspects that we find need for. With a 16-hour time difference, we can e-mail Oak Brook late in the evening and know that the computer the next morning the answer is already there for us.

At each of the recycling centers, Lions volunteer their time, cost, talent and performances for the necessary services on a pair of eyeglasses—first by delivering them to the hands of their new owner. The volunteers are trained to inspect and clean each pair, determine and record prescription strength, place them in protective packages, sort and store according to prescription, maintain inventory of processes, and recycle glasses.

"Upon receipt, the glasses also are sorted to dispose of garbage which includes those lenses, eyeglass cases and broken frames," explains Bernie Gibbons, chairman of the Canadian LERC. "We sort according to single vision, bi-focal, reading, children and prescription sunglasses...even safety glasses."

"The glasses are sorted as a machine called a lensometer determines the prescription of the glasses; this process is known as neutralizing, or grading. It's extremely important that the volunteers are trained in using this machine so that the correct prescriptions are sent in the correct packaging. In fact, this process generally requires two people: one to operate the lensmeter and one to record the prescription and affix the label to the packaging.

**VIEW FROM A MISSION**

Dr. William Iannaccone, of Walnut Creek, Calif., is a semi-retired orthopaedic surgeon who uses his vacation days and free time traveling to different countries to use his vacation days and free time traveling to different countries. In 1998 he met the one at the beginning of this story. He served a two-year term as international director of LCI in 1993 and currently is COO for Lions in Sight, the California and Nevada. "Lions in Sight does about 12 missions each year to Mexico because of the proximity to California," Iannaccone explains. "We’ve been involved in projects with eyeglasses for several hundreds of thousands of people in India, where we’ve been involved in more than 30 mission projects to places likeニア, Sri Lanka, Panama and Argentina.

"We’re currently going to six countries," he says. "We take four optometrists with us and five Lions who actually fit the glasses on place."

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