

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.

A GLANCE AT THE PAST

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 MOTTO

We Serve.

LIONS MISSION STATEMENT

To create and foster a spirit of understanding among all people for humanitarian needs by providing voluntary services through community involvement and international cooperation.

in Florida set up a blind Girl Scout troop. Additionally, Lions were instrumental in establishing the white cane; they raised funds for the sound-recording of books; they supported guide dog schools and held summer camps.

However, a service that started in individual clubs multiplied exponentially and has since changed the world for millions of people. Asking people to donate their used eyeglasses, then recycling them for those less fortunate in developing countries proved to be a very popular activity for Lions.

"We estimate that Lions recycle more than 20 million eyeglasses annually," says Peter Lynch, newly appointed executive administrator for LCI. Lynch has been with the organization for more than 16 years in a variety of capacities. "No one knows when the first glasses were recycled. My guess is that once Lions heard about Helen Keller's call for them to become 'Knights of the Blind,' they began to look for ways that they could respond. One way was to find eyeglasses that they, their family and friends no longer needed and to give these glasses to people who needed them. From this grew Lions' worldwide efforts."

OH, SAY I CAN SEE

According to the World Health Organization, 153 million people around the world have uncorrected refractive errors, more commonly known as near-sightedness, far-sightedness and astigmatism. Refractive errors can be diagnosed easily and corrected with glasses, but millions of people in developing countries do not have access to these basic services. While it costs just eight cents to recycle a pair of eyeglasses, the value to someone able to then see clearly for the first time is priceless.

Even though individual clubs had collected eyeglasses since 1925, The Lions Eyeglasses Recycling Program was not adopted as an official service activity of Lions Clubs International until October 1994.

"Lions clubs were actively involved in collecting and recycling eyeglasses long before 1994," Lynch says. "By that year, the program had grown to such an extent that it was decided to establish a more formal network of Lions recycling centers and to significantly expand recycling efforts. We expanded support and funding for local collection programs and also developed partnerships with LensCrafters and other optical companies to expand the program's reach. The board's action in 1994 has given a great impetus to the recycling efforts that were already taking place."

That year at a board meeting in Rome, the Lions service activities committee reported to the board of directors, "while the individual Lions eyeglass collection programs have been successful, the collective strength of a coordinated program could raise still higher the impact Lions can have on the vision-impaired in the world." The committee proposed specific objec-

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 large-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 Sight-First 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 8 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, May is the month designated by LCI as the specific time to focus on this initiative.

Collection boxes exist in neighborhoods everywhere. Many stores allow 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 EYEGGLASS 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 nonprescription. Children's eyeglasses are especially needed. For more information, visit www.lionsclubs.org.



tives of such a broad-reaching project. They are:

1. Helping to conserve sight by providing glasses through the association's infrastructure.
2. Promoting eyeglass collection, processing and distribution.
3. Reinforcing Lions identification 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 (LERC).

"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 districts 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 280 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 exist in 200 countries and geographical locations.

"Our members are the people on the ground," says Melitta Cutright, manager in the public relations department. "They know what's going on; they're responsible and we appreciate that."

The 13 recycling centers around the world (see sidebar) operate independently, but do receive public relations materials as well as administrative support from the Oak Brook staff. The LCI Web site contains a section devoted to the recycling centers, including forms the centers can download to report back on the number of eyeglasses they collect and then distribute, 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 a need for. [With a] 16-hour time difference, we can e-mail Oak Brook late in the evening and when we open the computer the next morning the answer is already there."

At each of the recycling centers, Lions volunteer their travel cost, time and talents to perform the necessary services on a pair of eyeglasses before they travel into 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 pouches, sort and store according to prescription, maintain inventory of processed eyeglasses and provide eyeglasses to Lions eye care missions.

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

Once the glasses are sorted, 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 lensometer 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 chiropractor who likes to use his vacation days and free time traveling to different countries to do missions, much like 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 LERC for California and Nevada.

"Lions in Sight does about 12 missions per year, 10 in Mexico because of the proximity to California," Iannaccone explains. "We've provided eye exams and glasses to several hundreds of thousands of people. I have personally been involved in more than 30 missions to places like Bosnia, Sri Lanka, Panama and Argentina."

"When we go on a mission, we take four optometrists with us and five Lions who actually fit the glasses," Iannaccone continues. "When you're making \$4 a month, a pair of eyeglasses is not a priority. Living, eating and providing for your family is. These people can't afford the glasses, so our old glasses are better than what they've got, of course."

(It is interesting to note that during FORUM's interview with Dr. Iannaccone, his cell phone rang; he answered it. It was a colleague in Bolivia whom he worked with for more than 10 years to set up missions. The two men were supposed to travel to southern Bolivia that week to do a presentation on eyeglass recycling, but the trip had been cancelled due to major riots in the area.)

In 2006, hundreds of missions were conducted worldwide. While they range in size and location, they have one important thing in common: dedicated, caring Lions in attendance. A "typical" mission location consists of a registration table, a waiting

EYEGLOSS RECYCLING CENTERS AROUND THE GLOBE

Lions Recycle for Sight Australia, Inc.
 Canadian Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center
 Medico Lions Clubs de France
 Centro Italiano Lions per la Raccolta Degli Occhiali Usati
 Lions Operation BrightSight/Republic of South Africa
 Spain Eyeglass Recycling Center/Centro De Reciclaje De Gatas melvinJones
 Lions In Sight Foundation of California and Nevada
 Indiana Eyeglass Recycling Center
 New Jersey Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center, Inc.
 Texas Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center
 Virginia Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center
 Northwest Lions Eyeglass Recycling Center (Washington state)
 Wisconsin Lions Foundation Eyeglass Recycling Center

area, examination stations and a dispensing section at which to interview and fit glasses to the prescriptions written by doctors.

Patients first receive an eye exam by an optometrist, an exterior exam for conditions such as cataracts and treatment for minor conditions (eg, conjunctivitis). If they are in need, a pair of free, recycled eyeglasses appropriate for their specific needs is provided to them.

Prior to any mission, the LERCs provide training options for volunteers. In Texas, for example, "There are training sessions each month," says Ike Fitzgerald, CEO of the Texas LERC. "There is no charge for this training; it gives participants knowledge in general vision anatomy and physiology, various methods of refractive testing, proper methods of recycled eyeglass selection and fitting and hands-on practice in providing recycled eyeglasses. Anyone participating in this training will be able to effectively participate in a recycled eyeglass screening, and would also be better capable of assisting others in the mission team."

By the end of 2006, Lions In Sight of California and Nevada had shipped more than five million pairs of eyeglasses to 58 countries around the world. However, the distribution capabilities in some countries is limited. In 1998, that group embarked on a new effort to improve the delivery of basic eye care and eyeglasses by establishing permanent clinics. These clinics and the supporting distribution network are operated by local Lions within each country. This allows many regions to have a permanent, year-round capability for serving those in need, versus relying solely upon temporary clinic visits by volunteers.

Necessary funds for permanent clinics are obtained with financial support from the LCI Foundation and matching funds from the local host Lions districts, Lions In Sight and co-sponsoring Lions districts in the United States.

Five permanent clinics have been established in Peru; four in Sri Lanka; and 14 now exist in Mexico, with many more planned, according to Iannaccone.

"The major thing I helped to establish were the permanent clinics," Iannaccone says. This was an important development, he emphasizes, because so many times, crossing borders is a challenge.

"Shipping [eyeglasses to] and dealing with Third World countries is not like the United States at all," he maintains. "Getting the glasses and equipment into the countries can be a challenge."

A CLOSER LOOK

In order to continue providing proper assistance to the recycling centers and to ensure consistency from center to center, the current LCI board of directors decided to send a representative to visit each center this year.

Charles Mandelbaum, COO of the LERC of Northern Virginia explains, "We interact with LCI through quarterly reports and occasional correspondence. Our center follows the practices recommended by LCI for operating a LERC, but we do not interact on a regular basis with other centers."

Current international president Jimmy Ross selected Past International Director Marshall Cooper as special board appointee to visit each eyeglass recycling center to determine three things: 1) what each center is doing; 2) what they are capable of doing; and 3) what they are willing to do.

"It is important to the recycling program to get each center working on the same page," Cooper says. "A major concern we have is all centers doing basically the same thing. [Currently] centers do not all do the same thing. There are good ideas at each center which should be shared."

Cooper, who served as chairman of the service activities committee and chaired the Lions Eyeglass Recycling Meeting in 1995, knows what he is talking about. He's been on numerous missions over the years.

"The one that stands out was in Catacamas, Olancho, Honduras," Cooper says. "Thousands of needy people came to the Lions complex for screening, including a 94-year-old man. He was processed through the screening and a pair of recycled glasses placed on him. When we handed him the chart to read, he began to sob. Thinking we had done something wrong, we asked him what the problem was. He said, 'Nothing. I am just so happy now I can again see.' He then said, 'There is one more test I need.' He produced a well-worn Bible from his hat, carefully wrapped in protective paper. Again he sobbed, 'Thank you. I can now read my Bible, the first time in over 15 years.' He stood outside in the hot sun for hours just to tell all who were waiting what a wonderful thing Lions had made possible for him."

Lions touch both young and the old and provide them with "new eyes" every day around the world. Says Iannaccone, "In Kenya, we were examining children. A 15-year old girl was in line to be examined. She had a 2-year-old by the hand and was carrying another baby, maybe several months old. She was pregnant with her third child. We examined her eyes and found her to be legally blind. We had a pair of glasses for her, and placed them on her. She saw her babies faces for the first time. Ever. It was awesome." ■

Suzi Wirtz, CAE, may be reached at wirtz@associationforum.org or (312) 924-7030.

THE APRIL 2007 SIGNATURE STORY features the American Egg Board and the lasting effects of its "Incredible Edible Egg" advertising campaign. Hatched in 1977, the campaign vastly changed public opinion about eggs and significantly increased egg consumption. Louis Raffel, CAE, who initiated the campaign, recently retired and is succeeded by Joanne Ivy, CAE, who expects this legendary campaign and others to rise to new heights. Approximately 260 egg producers are represented by the AEB, which has a staff of 20 and a \$20 million budget. For more information, visit www.aeb.org.