How the Mason Eye Institute Got Its Name
It can be said that the Mason Eye Institute had its start 50 years ago, in 1960, with a gift of 1,000 acres of rich Iowa farmland from a prominent St. Louis ophthalmologist named Roy E. Mason, MD, and his wife, Elizabeth Patee Mason. We are forever grateful to Dr. and Mrs. Mason for their generosity. Their gift to ophthalmology endures and has been instrumental in helping the Mason Eye Institute become, and remain, a state-of-the-art center for eye care, residency training and eye research.

Dr. Mason was neither a University of Missouri graduate nor a faculty member, but he kindled a relationship with the University of Missouri during the last years of his career, in the late 1950s, when he served as a visiting professor in ophthalmology at the then very young University of Missouri School of Medicine. Dr. Mason had recently retired from the Department of Ophthalmology at Washington University School of Medicine, in St. Louis, and offered his services as a visiting professor to MU’s new ophthalmology program. Once weekly Dr. Mason traveled to Columbia from St. Louis to teach ophthalmology to medical students and ophthalmology residents.

Dr. Mason’s commitment to the success of ophthalmology at the University of Missouri led to his decision, in 1960, to include in his will an endowment to the ophthalmology program. The bequest stipulated that upon the deaths of Dr. Mason and his wife, ownership of the Mason farmland in Iowa was to be transferred to the University of Missouri and designated for the endowment of the Roy E. Mason, MD, and Elizabeth Patee Mason Distinguished Professorship in Ophthalmology.

Dr. Mason and his wife left it up to the department to decide how to use any money remaining after the Mason professorship was funded. Dr. Mason died in 1960, followed soon afterward by the death of his wife. With great foresight, the university did not sell the land, which was then valued at $500,000. Instead, the university decided to keep the land as an investment.

The soundness of this decision played out 15 or so years later, in the late 1970s, when the university sold the land. Its value had reached $2.5 million. The money was placed into the Mason Endowment Fund of the Department of Ophthalmology, and the amount was sufficient not only to continue funding the Mason Distinguished Professorship in perpetuity but also to pay for the construction of a much-needed outpatient eye clinic and administrative offices. Construction on the Mason Eye Institute began in 1980, and it opened in 1982.

Fittingly, the Mason Eye Institute is named in honor of Roy and Elizabeth Mason. Even though they have been gone for half a century, they are remembered each day because of their everlasting legacy to ophthalmology and to thousands of patients who receive care at the Mason Eye Institute.

April Fool’s Day 1959: The Beginning of Ophthalmology at MU
Ophthalmology at MU had existed for 20 years before the birth of the Mason Eye Institute. Ophthalmology came into being on April 1, 1959, when John Aure Buesseler, MD, joined the school of medicine as chief of ophthalmology. Columbia was then a town of about 36,000. MU had 8,000 students. Nurses wore white shirtwaist dresses, white hose and white caps. People in central Missouri often traveled to St. Louis or Kansas City to see an ophthalmologist.

Against the backdrop of a new hospital and medical school, Dr. Buesseler set out to establish MU’s first patient care, research and residency training program in ophthalmology. He gave the budding program a jump start by forming affiliations with Children’s Mercy Hospital, in Kansas City, and Kansas City General Hospital so that ophthalmology immediately had a patient population that would provide
ophthalmology residents with the necessary breadth of clinical experiences. Other faculty joined the ophthalmology program, including the esteemed Carl Ide, MD, who made ophthalmology at MU his life’s work until his retirement in 1991. Dr. Buesseler was ophthalmology chief for only seven years, but his leadership and abilities to recruit exceptional faculty in the early years laid the foundation for a strong program.

The Struggle for a Medical School at MU

The medical school and hospital opened three years before ophthalmology, in 1956, after decades of discussion and debate. Beginning as far back as the 1920s, MU’s Board of Curators tried to gain support in the Missouri legislature for a new hospital and four-year medical school in Columbia, at that time MU’s only campus. A two-year medical school had existed since the mid-1800s. Students took courses at MU but then were forced to spend the last two years elsewhere, at a four-year medical school. This situation put students in the position of having to find a four-year medical school where they could complete their clinical work and earn a medical degree.

A big factor in the resistance to a medical school in Columbia was a strong contingent that wanted the school in Kansas City. Opponents to the MU medical school in Columbia argued that a state-funded school should be in Kansas City because the population in central Missouri was too small to support a medical school, hospital and residency programs. Advocates believed a state-funded medical school and hospital should be in Columbia to provide more doctors to meet the health care needs of Missourians in rural areas. Finally, in 1952, after decades of wrangling, the Missouri legislature passed $13.6 million in appropriations to build a hospital and medical school in Columbia. Construction began in 1954, and the hospital and school opened on September 16, 1956.

The Making of an Eye Institute at MU

The opening of the Eye Institute in 1982 represented a dream come true for Robert P. Burns, MD, who was then professor and chairman of ophthalmology. An astute clinician and visionary leader, Dr. Burns became department chair in 1979 and made Dr. Mason’s hopes for ophthalmology a reality by establishing a premier eye institute. Back then, there were only 14 such eye institutes in the country. Working alongside Dr. Burns was his wife and research collaborator, Lynette Feeney-Burns, PhD, a scientist in the field of macular degeneration.

How Roy and Elizabeth Mason created a legacy gift to ophthalmology

Their name is on the institute, yet when Roy and Elizabeth Mason created their planned gift, they may never have guessed how transformational their gift would be to the Mason Eye Institute.

“How bequests can be surprisingly significant and often amount to much more than the donors ever imagined,” said James Preston, senior director of development with the MU Office of Gift Planning and Endowments. “The Masons very generously gave land but probably had no idea how valuable their gift would be once the University actually received it and turned it into an endowment.”

Simplicity is one of the reasons people choose to do bequests, according to Preston. “Bequests are instructions in an estate plan on how to leave property to people or institutions. The Masons’ bequest was of a specific piece of property, but bequests can just as easily be a percentage or a divisible part of the entire estate,” Preston said.

Real estate requires special consideration even when given through a bequest. “We encourage people to inform us if they plan to give real estate to MU,” Preston stated. Some considerations include whether or not a property is marketable or productive, and whether there are liens against the property. “If the university is involved during planning, we can help the donor avoid issues that might prevent the gift from occurring as the donor wishes.”

If you have questions about making a gift to the Mason Eye Institute, you may contact the MU Office of Gift Planning and Endowments. The phone number is 800-970-9977; or email giftplanning@missouri.edu. You may also contact Linda Davis, Department Administrator at the Mason Eye Institute. Her phone number is 573-882-1020; e-mail: davislg@health.missouri.edu

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Mission of the Mason Eye Institute

The Mason Eye Institute is dedicated to providing the highest quality education, research and patient care in ophthalmology. The Mason Eye Institute provides leadership that sets standards for excellence in ophthalmology by developing well-trained, competent, compassionate ophthalmologists; expanding knowledge through basic science research and clinical investigations; and providing thorough, compassionate care to our patients, which includes the latest advances in medical eye care.

Thank you to those who have contributed to the furtherance of our mission through your generous gifts.

John W. Cowden, M.D.
Professor and Chairman

Fast Forward to the Present

The retirement of Dr. Burns in 1991 ushered in the era of our current Roy E. Mason Distinguished Professor and Chairman, John W. Cowden, MD, who joined the Mason Eye Institute in 1993. Under Dr. Cowden’s leadership, ophthalmology has grown to include 14 clinical faculty, 26 clinic staff and 20 office staff. There are nine ophthalmology residents in training at any given time. The Mason Eye Institute has the only glaucoma specialists, pediatric ophthalmologists and neuro-ophthalmologist in central Missouri. Our clinical faculty now have outreach clinics in Boonville, Jefferson City, Osage Beach and Sedalia. As many as 22,000 patients are seen annually at the Mason Eye Institute.

The Mason Eye Institute’s research division has four PhD faculty: Drs. Martin Katz, Rajiv Mohan, Krishna Sharma and Lixing Reneker. They each have a laboratory and staff, including six PhDs and two MDs. Research is under way on lens proteins in cataract formation, lens development, Batten’s disease and retinal degeneration, and gene therapy for corneal diseases. Grant awards for 2011 total $2.7 million, with the major source of funds coming from the National Institutes of Health. Together, research faculty hold eight NIH grants.

To meet the needs of an increasing number of patients, our Columbia eastside clinic moved to a larger facility in January 2012. Called University Eye Institute East, this clinic is in a new medical office building, at 3215 Wingate Court, off of Keene Street. The new facility, like the Mason Eye Institute, provides complete diagnostic and treatment services. Our cornea, retina, glaucoma and pediatric ophthalmology specialists, along with our general ophthalmologists and optometrists, see patients at the University Eye Institute East and the Mason Eye Institute as well.

Without question, the hopes that Dr. and Mrs. Mason held for ophthalmology are thriving 50 years after their bequest. Their generosity put ophthalmology on its path of sustained success in patient care, eye research and the training of ophthalmologists for tomorrow.

Sharon Scott Morey, Editor

The Mason Eye Institute initially was a one-story building, separate from university hospital. In 1985, the hospital expanded and was built around the Mason Eye Institute, making the freestanding building a part of the hospital. The 1985 hospital expansion included expansion of the Mason Eye Institute. A second floor was built for the growing research division. This addition was funded by the Mason endowment and a grant from the National Eye Institute.

The Burns husband-wife team achieved so much in ophthalmology during their 12 years at MU, until their retirement in 1991. Patient care, vision research and ophthalmology residency training came together under one roof. Specialists in the different fields of ophthalmology joined the faculty, including a glaucoma specialist, a pediatric ophthalmologist and a neuro-ophthalmologist. (The pediatric ophthalmologist, Dr. Joseph Giangiacomo, and the neuro-ophthalmologist, Dr. Lenworth Johnson, continue to be on the faculty.) Already established in ophthalmology was a strong cataract research program, directed by Beryl J. Ortwerth, PhD, who began his cataract research at MU in 1968. (Now professor emeritus of ophthalmology, Dr. Ortwerth is internationally recognized for his research on the effects of ultraviolet light on lens transparency and cataract formation.) The research division was further strengthened in the Burns era by the addition of another retina scientist, Martin L. Katz, PhD, who remains on the faculty and is doing research on Batten’s disease. In 1990, K. Krishna Sharma, Ph.D., now director of research, joined the research faculty, launching his career in lens and cataract research.
Mason Eye Institute Faculty

CLINICAL FACULTY

Arghavan Almony, MD
Dr. Almony is an assistant professor of ophthalmology. She specializes in the diagnosis, treatment and surgery of diseases involving the macula, retina and vitreous.

John W. Cowden, MD
Dr. Cowden is the chairman of the Department of Ophthalmology and specializes in cornea and external diseases of the eye. A cornea transplant surgeon, he also performs corneal, refractive and cataract surgery.

Geetha K. Davis, MD
Dr. Davis joined the Mason Eye Institute on September 1, 2011, as clinical instructor of ophthalmology. Dr. Davis is a comprehensive ophthalmologist and performs adult cataract surgery.

Chris DeRose, OD
Dr. DeRose is a clinical instructor and specializes in primary care optometry, contact lens fitting and keratoconus.

Jeffrey M. Gamble, OD
Dr. Gamble, an optometrist and clinical assistant professor, provides a lecture series on optics and contact lenses to our resident physicians.

Joseph Giangiacomo, MD
Dr. Giangiacomo has recently retired from full-time practice. He continues to practice on a part-time basis.

Dean P. Hainsworth, MD
Dr. Hainsworth is professor of ophthalmology and specializes in retina and vitreous diseases. His current research includes macular degeneration and diabetic retinopathy.

Lenworth N. Johnson, MD
Dr. Johnson is professor of ophthalmology and specializes in neuro-ophthalmology. As residency program director, Dr. Johnson oversees the education of our resident physicians.

Jeffrey Leipholtz, OD
Dr. Leipholtz is the newest member of our faculty. He is a clinical instructor and specializes in primary care optometry, contact lens fitting and keratoconus.

Don Liu, MD
Dr. Liu specializes in oculoplastic surgery and orbital trauma. His clinical interests also include orbital and eyelid tumor reconstruction, tearing and dry eyes, thyroid eye disease, eyelid reanimation, and eye socket reconstruction. He is a professor of clinical ophthalmology.

Tara G. Missoi, MD
Dr. Missoi specializes in pediatric ophthalmology, adult strabismus and cataract surgery. She is an assistant professor of clinical ophthalmology.

Marcos Reyes, MD
Dr. Reyes is a glaucoma specialist who performs cataract surgery, anterior segment surgery, glaucoma lasers and other specialized glaucoma surgeries. He is an assistant professor of clinical ophthalmology.

Dan B. Schoenleber, MD
Dr. Schoenleber specializes in glaucoma. He is medical director of the eye clinics and is associate professor of clinical ophthalmology.

Theodore E. Wills, MD
Dr. Wills is a comprehensive ophthalmologist. He oversees residency training in the clinical setting. He is a clinical assistant professor.

RESEARCH FACULTY

Martin L. Katz, PhD
Dr. Katz is currently involved in metabolic disease research, specifically in the study of neuronal ceroid lipofuscinosis (NCL), an inherited metabolic disease that affects nerve cells and causes blindness.

Rajiv R. Mohan, PhD
Dr. Mohan’s field of research is on corneal gene therapy, nanomedicine, wound healing and refractive laser surgery.

Lixing W. Reneker, PhD
Dr. Reneker’s research focuses on the molecular mechanisms that control lens and corneal development. Her interest is to use mouse models to understand pathogenesis of human ocular diseases.

K. Krishna Sharma, MSc, PhD
Dr. Sharma is director of research. His research involves understanding the molecular basis for lens transparency and cataract development.