

Creating a vision for the future of research

Living with eye issues all of his life, donor Donald K. Johnson knows vision is essential to a person's quality of life

Marjo Johne

Donald K. Johnson has had vision problems for most of his life. He was diagnosed with myopia – also known as short- or nearsightedness – when he was a child, and as an adult he developed glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration.

So in 2007, when he had an opportunity to help establish an eye centre at Toronto Western Hospital that would offer patients the latest treatments, Mr. Johnson stepped up – with a \$5-million gift.

“Having good vision is key to experiencing a very productive and enjoyable life,” says Mr. Johnson, a veteran investment banker who was named to the Investment Industry Association of Canada's Hall of Fame in 2013. “It's believed that 90 per cent of what we learn comes from vision – it's essential to a person's happy lifestyle.”

The \$5-million donation funded the launch of the Donald K. Johnson Eye Centre. That was just the beginning. On his 80th birthday, he and his wife, Anna McCowan-Johnson, donated another \$10 million.

This enabled the Krembil Research Institute to merge its Vision Science Research Program with the Donald K. Johnson Eye Centre to create the Donald

K. Johnson Eye Institute – a centre of excellence, where clinicians, researchers and educators can collaborate to advance the latest treatments for vision loss.

“That was the best birthday gift I received: the opportunity to top up my gift to create the leading eye institute in Canada and one of the best internationally,” says Mr. Johnson, who was born in Lundar, Man., to parents of Icelandic descent. “I believe we all have a responsibility to give back to the communities and institutions that have touched and changed our lives.”

Philanthropy like this has already helped support a number of groundbreaking achievements and is enabling Krembil researchers in their tireless quest for more.

Mr. Johnson says his life has certainly been changed by Krembil and Toronto Western Hospital.

“I wear contacts today,” says Mr. Johnson. “I have cataracts and glaucoma, but I haven't needed surgery. I've had great treatment at Toronto Western.”

Mr. Johnson's support for vision care and research dates back to the late 1980s – but his contributions to philanthropy go far beyond that. For 12 years, he lobbied for the removal of capital gains tax on listed securities donated to charity.

The federal government lifted this tax in 2006. This has created more opportunities for people to be philanthropic and has had a major impact on many organizations.

“Since then, charities have received more than \$1 billion virtually every year,” says Mr. Johnson.

But more needs to be done, he adds. Since 2006, Mr. Johnson has turned his lobbying efforts to capital gains tax on charitable donations of private company shares and real estate.

Such efforts are critical in the face of increasingly tight government budgets, he says.

“I think it's important for people to realize that all levels of government today are facing fiscal challenges and have a limited capacity to provide research funding for all diseases, including eyes,” says Mr. Johnson. “Private sector donations are really key to enabling the purchase of the latest technology and equipment, and attracting star researchers to our institutions.”

“Governments can provide funding to enable organizations to be good, but it's the donations from individuals and private sector companies that help research organizations go from being good to being great.” ■

Krembil

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The Krembil Research Institute is one of the principal research institutes of University Health Network, Canada's largest research hospital. Scientists at Krembil are relentlessly pursuing cures for debilitating, chronic diseases in three main areas:

1. BRAIN & SPINE DISORDERS

such as epilepsy, stroke, dementia, depression, pain, spinal cord injury, concussion, Alzheimer's disease and Parkinson's disease.

2. BONE & JOINT DISORDERS

such as osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus erythematosus and ankylosing spondylitis.

3. EYE DISORDERS

such as glaucoma, macular degeneration and retinopathy.

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219 researchers

901 peer-reviewed publications produced**

118 fellows and graduate student trainees

146,568 sq. ft.
of dedicated research space

*Based on 2016 data. **Publications from the 2015 calendar year.

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