

A champion of eye ingenuity

With leadership, generosity and a passion to make charitable giving easier, philanthropist Donald K. Johnson is driving advancements in vision care and research

By Jordana Feldman



In his decades of fundraising for countless not-for-profit organizations, Donald K. Johnson has often sealed the deal with a favourite pair of quotes.

"I like to tell people, 'It's better to give it away with a warm hand than a cold hand,' and, 'He who gives while he lives always knows where it goes,'" Johnson says with a chuckle from his Toronto home.

A veteran investment banking executive, Johnson is one of Canada's most renowned philanthropists. And as a board member of Toronto General & Western Hospital Foundation for more than 20 years, he is a driving force behind the 2020 Vision Campaign underway at the world-class facility that bears his name. The Donald K. Johnson Eye Institute, one of the largest and most comprehensive eye clinics in North America, set the ambitious target of raising \$20 million this year.

Health charities and organizations across the country have faced intense challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, with cancellations of in-person events disrupting fundraising plans. Despite these challenges, the 2020 Vision Campaign is well on the way to achieving its goal. Johnson is both proud and unsurprised by the campaign's success.

"Ours is the leading eye institute in Canada and one of the top five in North America, and I think donors like to give to an organization that is both a leader and recognized internationally," he says. "There are also many very grateful patients, families and friends who want to give back to the Institute and express their gratitude."

Johnson is one of those grateful patients himself.

Having experienced myopia, glaucoma, cataracts and macular degeneration throughout his life,

he enjoys healthy vision now, thanks to the sharp diagnostic eyes at the Institute. Johnson's glaucoma went undetected for years, but when he saw Dr. Graham Trope, now co-director of the Glaucoma Clinic at the Donald K. Johnson Eye Institute, the doctor "diagnosed it right away and began the treatment, which prevented its progression," he says.

Johnson and his late wife Anna McCowan-Johnson have donated more than \$15 million over 10 years to help the Donald K. Johnson Eye Institute become the eye care and research powerhouse it is today.

Another of Johnson's passions is his mission to make it easier to give. He was made an Officer of the Order of Canada in 2009, in part for his role in changing tax laws to eliminate the capital gains tax on gifts of listed securities to registered charities.

Johnson says that measure

Donald K. Johnson's new book, *Lessons Learned on Bay Street*, will be published in 2021

brings in more than \$1 billion in gifts of stock to charities every year. Now, he's lobbying to bring in a new law that will remove all capital gains tax on charitable donations of private company shares and real estate. Johnson estimates that Canada is losing up to \$200 million a year in additional charitable donations, because this measure is not yet in place.

"With the COVID-19 pandemic, many charities are really struggling from a financial perspective," he says. "So the timing is really right now." ▽

To support the 2020 Vision Campaign, please visit: tgwhf.ca/vision2020