

THE LIONS' EYE

Newsletter of the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island
Located at: **LIJ Valley Stream Hospital - Northwell Health**

July 2026
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Visit Our Website
www.lebli.org

A MESSAGE
FROM THE DIRECTOR



As we move through another meaningful year, I am proud to reflect on the growth and momentum we continue to build. Both as an organization, and as a community dedicated to the gift of sight.

This past April, we honored Donate Life Month with gratitude for the donors and families who make our work possible. Every tissue we process and every surgery we support begins with an extraordinary act of generosity. It is a privilege we never take for granted.

On the surgical side, we have been deepening our partnerships with the talented surgeons who trust us for their patient's care. Whether supporting a long-standing relationship or welcoming a new colleague into our network, our commitment remains the same: to provide the highest quality tissue alongside the personalized, responsive service that sets us apart. We believe that when a surgeon calls us, they should feel like they have a dedicated partner - not just a supplier.

That philosophy was on full display at the EBAA Annual Meeting in Indianapolis, where our team had the opportunity to connect with colleagues from across the country, engage with the latest in eye banking science, and reaffirm our place at the forefront of the field.

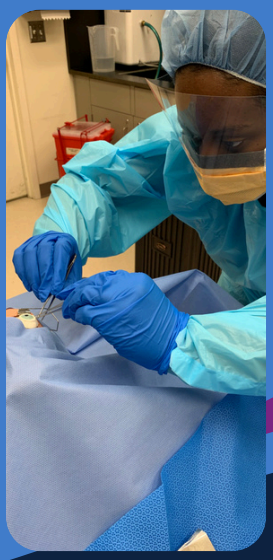
And this November, we look forward to celebrating a major milestone - our 40th Anniversary Gala. Forty years of restoring sight, serving our community, and growing alongside the surgeons and donors who make this mission possible. It will be a night to honor how far we've come and to look ahead with excitement at what's next.

Thank you for being a part of this journey. The best is still ahead.

Kristen Conte,
Director, Lions Eye Bank for Long Island







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EYE FOUNDATION, INC.

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CHAIRPERSON'S CORNER

Welcome to the second edition of the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island serving Brooklyn and Queens Newsletter. As we continue our mission of restoring sight and bringing hope to so many individuals and families, I remain deeply grateful for the unwavering support of our Lions, medical partners, donors, and community friends.

This year is especially meaningful as we prepare to celebrate a major milestone — the 40th Anniversary Gala of the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island on November 15, 2026. For four decades, the Eye Bank has stood as a shining example of compassion, service, and dedication to preserving and restoring vision throughout Long Island, Brooklyn, and Queens. This anniversary is not only a celebration of our history, but also a tribute to the countless donors and supporters whose generosity has changed lives.

As we look toward the future, we invite everyone to become more involved in our mission. One of the greatest gifts a person can give is the gift of sight through eye donation. By becoming a registered donor and encouraging others to do the same, you can help provide hope and healing to those waiting for the opportunity to see again.

We also encourage our readers to support the upcoming Gala celebration. Your participation helps advance the important work of the Eye Bank and ensures that our mission continues for generations to come.

Together, through service, compassion, and commitment, we can continue making a lasting difference in the lives of others.

Thank you for your continued support of the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island and for believing in the power of giving the gift of sight.

PCC Deborah Harrison,
Chairperson
Long Island Lions Eye Foundation

National Donate Life Month

Every April, National Donate Life Month shines a spotlight on the life-saving and life-changing impact of organ, eye, and tissue donation. It's a time to honor donors and their families, celebrate the courage of transplant recipients, and encourage others to consider the gift of donation.

Behind every statistic is a story — a family who found comfort in knowing their loved one's legacy lives on, or a recipient who was given a second chance at life, sight, or health. These stories remind us that donation is more than a medical process; it's an act of profound generosity that connects strangers in the most meaningful way.

At the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island, we see this impact firsthand every day. Corneal donation can restore sight to those living with vision loss, offering not just improved eyesight but renewed independence and quality of life. Behind every successful transplant is a donor whose decision to give continues to make a difference long after their passing.

This April, we encourage everyone to learn more about donation, talk to their families about their wishes, and consider registering as a donor. It's a simple decision that carries the power to change — and even save — lives.



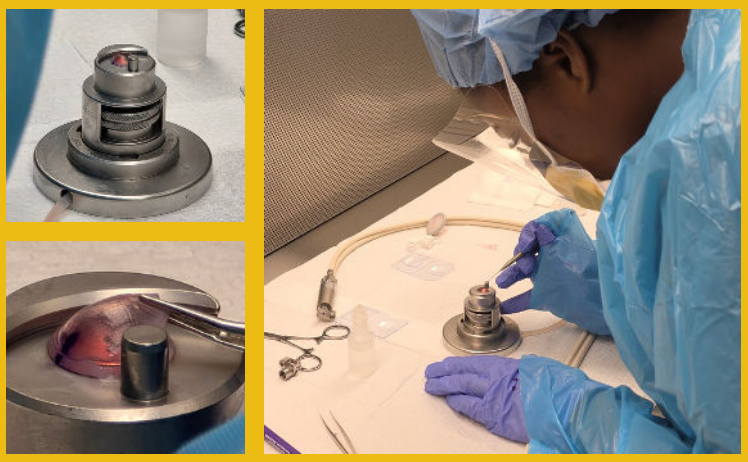
ON THE COVER

The compelling photos on the cover of this issue capture **The Gift of Life: Stories that Connect Us**, an event hosted by the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island in collaboration with the Hispanic and Latino BERG. The afternoon brought together panelists from across the donation field — representing organ, eye, and tissue donation — alongside diverse voices and perspectives for an informative and moving discussion.

These images reflect the powerful connections formed as recipients, donor families, and professionals shared their stories and expertise. From thoughtful dialogue to heartfelt moments of connection, each photo captures the impact of donation and the importance of representation in raising awareness across all communities.

Did You Know

More than 50% of corneal tissue transplanted in the United States is initially processed by Eye Bank professionals using highly specialized techniques and equipment, like the ALTK heads mentioned in the adjacent article.



Pictured: Corneal tissue sitting atop Moria equipment during DSAEK preparation (left); Eye Bank Technician Nootshy Romage, performing DSAEK processing (right).

Knights of the Blind Award

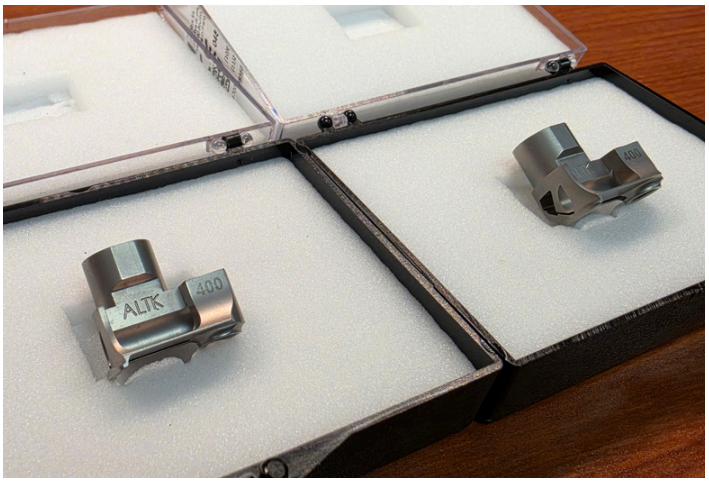
Established in 1999, the Knights of the Blind Award recognizes outstanding Lions, non-Lions, organizations, or businesses who have demonstrated exemplary service to a club, district, or community. These honorees embody the highest ideals of good character, purpose, and service. Scan the QR code to the right or click here to apply.

SCAN HERE

Lions-Funded DSAEK Upgrade

The Lions Eye Bank for Long Island would like to thank the Foundation for the generous donation of $16,000 for the purchase of two 400 microkeratome heads. These heads allow our technicians to prepare thinner corneal grafts for the DSAEK process. (Descemet Stripping Automated Endothelial Keratoplasty), a procedure used to treat corneal endothelial diseases. We're deeply grateful to the Lions for their continued investment, in advancing the eye bank's mission to provide sight to those suffer from corneal blindness

On the more technical side, why does a thinner graft matter? Thinner DSAEK grafts under 80 microns, have been associated with patients being able to see more clearly as there is less visual distortions after the surgery. The healing time of an ultrathin DSAEK (as it's called in the industry), allows the cornea to heal faster. This allows patients to bounce back faster, and enjoy clear vision sooner. This generous donation by the Lions directly translate to better surgical outcomes, and an improved quality of life for the patients.



Pictured: The Lions Eye Bank for Long Island's two new 400 micron ALTK heads for Decemet's Stripping Automated Endothelial Keratoplasty procedures, courtesy of the Long Island Lions Eye Foundation, Inc.

LILEF Donor Family Scholarship

The Long Island Lions Eye Foundation annually awards scholarships to students whose family members have generously donated ocular tissue to the Lions Eye Bank and are pursuing higher education. Applicants submit recommendations and an essay on "How Eye Tissue Donation Has Affected You or Your Family and What it Means to You."

This year, after careful review, we are proud to announce our scholarship recipient: Ireland Protosow. Ireland is an outstanding student at Rocky Point High School with an impressive 91.82 GPA.

The Long Island Lions Eye Foundation congratulates Ireland on her achievement and wishes her success in her future endeavors.



Pictured: Long Island Lions Eye Foundation Board members and scholarship recipient, Ireland Protosow



ONE CONVERSATION CHANGED EVERYTHING

A Q&A with PDG Lion Maria Leitão, Long Island Portuguese Lions Club and a donor family member

What does Donate Life Month mean to you personally, given your own family's experience with donation?

Donate Life Month is a reminder that one conversation can change countless lives. Thirty years ago, if you had asked my family about organ, tissue, or eye donation, we probably would have said HELL NO. Not because we didn't care—but because we simply didn't understand. Like so many families, we had never talked about it. Everything changed when I became a Lion and began volunteering as a cornea transporter for the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island. What started as volunteer work became a passion and ultimately changed the course of my family's life forever. Today, Donate Life Month is no longer just about raising awareness. It's about honoring my husband, Eddie, whose final act of kindness continues to give hope to others every single day.

When your husband passed, how did the decision to donate come about, and what did that moment feel like?

People are often surprised when I tell them Eddie wasn't a registered donor. When we first started dating, one of our very first dates wasn't dinner or a movie—it was a trip to JFK Airport to pick up donated corneal tissue. Most people would probably think I was crazy for asking someone to do that on a date, but Eddie didn't hesitate. In fact, he loved it. From that day forward, he became my partner on hundreds of cornea transports. During those quiet drives to and from the airport, we talked about donation, about the families, and about the incredible gift of sight. One day he simply said, "If anything ever happens to me, I want to do this too." Years later, the day I lost him, I was completely overwhelmed. Then the LiveOnNY Family Advocate walked into the room. Instead of feeling fear, my first words were, "Oh my God… I almost forgot. I'm so happy you're here." She looked at me in complete shock. I knew why she was there. I knew what Eddie wanted. In the middle of the worst day of my life, honoring his wishes became the easiest decision I would ever make.

Did you have any hesitations at the time, and what helped you move forward with the decision?

My hesitation wasn't about donation. My hesitation was accepting that my husband was gone. The decision itself never felt difficult because I knew Eddie's heart. He was larger than life. He loved deeply, laughed loudly, and would give anyone the shirt off his back without expecting anything in return. If he could save someone's life… If he could help someone see again… There is no doubt in my mind he would have said yes every single time. Granting that wish was one final gift I could give him.

Have you learned anything about who received your husband's gift, and if so, how did that impact you?

I know Eddie's corneas restored sight to two people. I don't know their names or what they look like. But I think about them often. I wonder what they saw for the first time. I wonder if they watched a sunrise, saw the faces of their grandchildren, or simply looked into the eyes of someone they love. Knowing that part of Eddie lives on in this world is incredibly comforting. If I am ever given the opportunity to meet those recipients, I don't think I would have many words. I would simply hug them.

As a cornea transporter, you've personally transported tissue that will restore someone's sight. How does that feel knowing your husband's story began that same journey for someone else?

Every transport feels different now. Years ago, I was simply transporting tissue or actually what I thought were eyeballs. Not truly thinking about the entire process. Today, I know exactly what the donor family is feeling because I have been in their shoes. I know what it's like to receive that devastating phone call. I know what it's like to say goodbye. I also know the incredible comfort that comes from knowing your loved one is giving someone else hope. Every time I place that cooler in my car, I quietly think about the donor…the family…and the person waiting to receive the gift of sight. And every single time… I think about Eddie.

What do you wish more New Yorkers understood about organ, tissue and eye donation?

I wish people understood that education changes everything. My family didn't believe in donation because we didn't understand it.

Register to be a Donor

If you were inspired by Maria and Eddie's story, please consider registering to be a donor to help save and enhance the lives of others. Scan the QR code to the right or click here to register.

SCAN



Today, we are some of its biggest advocates because we do. One donor can save lives, restore sight, heal burn victims, and change dozens of families forever. The hardest part isn't the donation. It's never having had the conversation before tragedy strikes.

There are still a lot of myths and hesitations around donation. From your perspective as both a donor family member and a volunteer, what would you say to someone on the fence?

I'd ask them to imagine the person they love most. Now imagine that even after they're gone, they could help another mother, father, son, daughter, husband or wife live a longer, fuller life. That's what donation does. It doesn't take away your grief. But it gives your grief purpose

How has being a part of the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island's mission helped you find meaning in your loss?

The Lions Eye Bank didn't just teach me about donation. It unknowingly prepared me for the day I would need it most. Today, when I volunteer as a cornea transporter, I don't see coolers. I see miracles. I see families honoring someone they love. I see recipients getting a second chance. And I see Eddie's legacy continuing every single day. Service has become part of my healing.

If someone reading this hasn't registered to be a donor yet, what would you say to them?

Please don't wait. Have the conversation today. Years before Eddie passed away, we had ours while driving to the airport on what most people would consider an ordinary day. Neither of us knew that conversation would one day become one of the greatest gifts he would ever leave me. Because of that conversation, I never questioned what he wanted. Today, because of his generosity, people are living with hope…and two people are seeing the world through the gift he left behind. That is a legacy that will outlive both of us.



IN MEMORY OF
Edward Lisboa, devoted father and husband
Always Remembered

LEBLI's Partnership with LI TRIO

The Long Island Transplant Recipients International Organization (TRIO) is the local chapter of an international, all-volunteer organization dedicated to improving quality of life for transplant candidates, recipients, donors, donor families, and their communities. Through outreach efforts like its School Speakers Program, led by a local high school science teacher, TRIO promotes organ, eye, and tissue donation while offering a network of encouragement and resources to those touched by donation and transplantation.

The organization's goals include raising public awareness about donation, supporting recipients and families, advocating for donor registration, and honoring donors' generosity. TRIO holds monthly health and wellness support meetings and hosts community events, including collaborations with the New York Mets and New York Islanders.

A special part of TRIO's mission is its Rose Garden at Eisenhower Park — a place of inspiration, reflection, and remembrance for donor families, recipients, and the community, and a living tribute to the lives transformed through transplantation. The garden is rededicated each year in a ceremony honoring the gift of life; the next rededication will take place on September 26, 2026.

Long Island TRIO also partners with the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island on community outreach, education, and donor awareness initiatives, most recently at Hofstra Medical School, where the event featured presentations from local transplant surgeons and the eye bank. Together, the two organizations continue inspiring communities across the region to support the gift of life through donation.



Pictured: LI TRIO Education Day at Hofstra Medical School with physician speakers from Northwell Health and the Lions Eye Bank for Long Island; Dr. Bellucci, Dr. Mailloux and Dr. Zarola-Cohen

EBAA Annual Meeting

The Lions Eye Bank for Long Island (LEBLI) was well-represented at this year's Eye Bank Association of America (EBAA) Annual Meeting in Indianapolis, with Kristen and Juan in attendance. This vital gathering brings together eye banking professionals from across the nation to collaborate, share insights, and shape the future of sight restoration.

The meeting provided an invaluable platform for networking, allowing Kristen and Juan to connect with peers and leaders from other eye banks. They actively participated in discussions surrounding key EBAA initiatives, including innovative approaches to Eye Donation Month, the rollout of the AI-powered EyeSearch knowledge assistant, and enhanced advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill.

A significant aspect of our team's participation involved active committee engagement. Juan, in particular, contributed his expertise to the EBAA Accreditation Board, a crucial role that helps uphold the highest standards of safety and quality across all EBAA-member eye banks.

Attending the EBAA Annual Meeting ensures LEBLI remains at the forefront of best practices and innovation. The insights and collaborations fostered will directly enhance our ability to serve our community and honor the gift of sight.



Pictured from left: Juan Pawirosetiko and Kristen Conte at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum, where one of the meeting's major networking dinners was held.

Tree of Life

The Long Island Lions Eye Foundation's Tree of Life is a meaningful way to honor or remember someone special. Featuring engraved brass leaves, acorns, stones, and mini trees, the display sits in a highly visible area on the first floor of LIJ Valley Stream, across from the coffee shop.

Every dedication supports the Eye Bank for Long Island's mission to provide high-quality eye tissue for transplant, advance research, and promote awareness about the importance of donation.

Consider adding your tribute and helping us continue the gift of sight. Scan the QR code or click here to learn more.



SCAN HERE

Save the Date!

LIONS EYE BANK FOR LONG ISLAND

40th Anniversary Gala Celebration

An Afternoon of Celebration & Impact

Together with great pride and gratitude, we invite you to celebrate a milestone of service, vision, and community.

November

Sunday 15 2026

1:00 PM – 5:00 PM

The Inn at New Hyde Park

214 Jericho Turnpike, New Hyde Park, NY 11040

Tickets: $125 per person

Cocktail Attire

Join us as we honor 40 years of restoring sight and changing lives throughout Brooklyn, Queens, and Long Island.

Kindly RSVP by November 1, 2026

Transporter's Spotlight

K1

Doreen Thomas

Lions Club Member
Central Brooklyn Lions Club



When I signed up to be a transporter, I was very happy, but when I received the call I became nervous and excited at the same time.

I remember picking up a cornea from the eye bank to deliver to a hospital in Brooklyn, I held the box carefully as if it contained eggs that should not be broken. I was directed to the operating room, where I was greeted with a big smile and outstretched hands for the box. I was relieved that it was delivered without incident.

On my way home. I really thought about the person who was waiting for the cornea and how they would have a new life being able to see. This gave me a sense of purpose, joy and an experience to remember.

K2

Nancy Kohler

Lions Club Member
Seaford Lions Club

I began my transporter role in 2014 after retiring the previous year and wanted to devote my time to something worthwhile. I love to drive so Eyebank volunteering was a natural fit. Since then, I've completed over 400 trips.

There is a sense of comfort and accomplishment with each delivery - greater than most any other activities we experience. It starts with the pickup at the Eyebank - a neatly packed styrofoam box is placed on my front seat and I wonder if the cornea was the result of a selfless, planned donation by an individual or possibly a family grieving the loss of a loved one, willing to bring joy and relief to a total stranger - an ultimate gift of caring? I've spent some spectacular mornings at 5:30 AM driving toward the beautiful NYC Skyline glowing from the sun rising behind me - will the recipient enjoy these visions? I hope they do!



In 2020, I was asked to make a delivery into the city - one of my favorite destinations. It was Valentine's Day - which for me and my boyfriend George Brennan (fellow Seaford Lion) is a day we bittersweetly observe/celebrate in honor of his late son Danny's death 7 years earlier. My initial reaction was to turn down the request as we had a routine for the day - attending morning church, followed by breakfast with George sharing Danny "stories". But George emphatically endorsed making the trip reflecting how it would be a great way to honor Dan's short life (22 yrs old). You see, Dan was an organ and tissue donor.

On Valentine's Day 2013, George's day began with a 3:50 AM phone call that Dan had passed. After a full day of grieving and consoling Dan's siblings, friends and family, George received a call at 11:10 PM that Dan's corneas had given the gift of sight to two individuals - hence the bittersweet description for the day. That Valentine's Day, we picked up the cornea to be delivered to a NY Hospital in midtown Manhattan, dropped it off that morning, attended mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral and then had lunch at Fraunces Tavern in downtown NYC - a place George and Dan had visited - a historic site that was part of many Boy Scout trips they helped organize and participated in.

In summary, transporters are a link in the circle of the gift of life, bringing these gifts - corneas - to the sight impaired recipients and fulfilling our original charge by Helen Keller to be Knights of the Blind. Each trip I make is not merely a delivery, it is a beautiful mission which never gets old!

S

Mary Jo McKay Thake

Vice President
Northport/Centerport Lions Club

Transporting as a cornea courier is extremely fulfilling as I know someone will receive their vision back, and I played a small part.

One challenging drive was on a Friday afternoon. At about 5:30pm I received a call to pick up corneas that needed to be in Manhattan for an 8pm surgery.

I had to drive from Northport to Valley Stream and then on to Manhattan, it took a lot of determination, focus and speed in rush hour. Normally the drives were early in the morning.

I made it to the operating room by 7:50pm! What a huge relief!





THE LIONS EYE BANK FOR LONG ISLAND