My name is Sally Hicken. I started working for the Utah Lions Eye Bank in 2018 as a Donor Coordinator. When a person passes away in Utah, we are notified via a phone call to the donor hotline. Once I got the new referral, I would determine if the deceased person was a good candidate for eye donation and call their family. It’s a difficult question to be asked moments after the loss of a loved one: do you want to donate your loved one’s eyes? More often than not the answer to this question was yes. I am constantly inspired by the strength of the donor families and their willingness to help strangers through donation in spite of their own tragic loss.

In 2019, I volunteered at the Celebration of Life Monument dedication and had the privilege of meeting some cornea donor families as well as cornea transplant recipients. I saw firsthand the impact my work has on my community which motivated me to learn more about eye banking.

Today I am a Tissue Processor for the eye bank which means that I help eye surgeons by preparing donated corneas for surgery ahead of time. Tissue processing is done in a clean environment similar to an operating room and I perform two types. DMEK processing is done using a microscope to carefully separate the innermost layer of the cornea by hand and insert it into a tiny glass tube. DSAEK preparation is performed using a hand piece with a blade to shave off the front part of the cornea leaving a thin area for the surgeon to transplant. Both techniques took me months of practice to master as they demand a steady hand and attention to detail.

I still work to improve my skills every single day in hopes of giving transplant patients the best possible chance at vision restoration. I feel very lucky to play a role in improving the sight of people in Utah, across the country and across the world.

**MYTH:** I have a previous history of cataract or laser correction surgery, so I cannot pledge my eyes for donation.  

**FACT:** Very few diseases or conditions interfere with your ability to donate your eyes. Eyes that can’t be used for transplant can often contribute to education and research efforts.
Discovery Points to Potential New Therapy for AMD

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ollowing more than a decade of research, SCTM Executive Director Gregory S. Hageman, PhD, and his team are pointing the way to new treatments for age-related macular degeneration (AMD) driven by a pair of genes on chromosome 10.

SCTM researchers previously determined AMD is not one disease—as has been long thought—but at least two biologically distinct diseases. Genes on chromosomes 1 and 10 account for at least 90 percent of a person’s genetic risk of developing AMD.

The chromosome 10 research team, led by Brandi Williams, PhD, shared its groundbreaking findings, which required access to thousands of donated eyes, in a paper published recently in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the United States of America.

The SCTM discovered that:

- The HtrA1 protein—encoded by chromosome 10—normally increases in a specific part of the retina as we age, where it may play a role in preventing abnormal deposits from accumulating.
- People with AMD-associated genetic variants on chromosome 10 make half as much HtrA1 in this part of the retina as they age, ultimately leading to eye damage, which may include abnormal deposits known as drusen and the development of abnormal blood vessels.

Funded in part by generous donors, the SCTM is developing a therapy to boost levels of the protein for these patients.

The SCTM’s unique repository of more than 8,000 pairs of donated human eyes played an essential role in the study since there are no animal models that accurately mimic the biology of chromosome 10-directed AMD. This critical resource, developed in collaboration with the Utah Lions Eye Bank, allowed the SCTM team to compare HTRA1 expression in eyes derived from donors with and without chromosome 10-associated risk genotypes.

“We were able to generate these exciting results thanks to our eye donors and their families,” said Dr. Hageman. “We are so extremely grateful for their precious gifts.”

Dr. Williams said the research will have a broad impact.

“These data should be important to the entire field and to patients with this devastating disease,” she said, “especially with respect to the development of therapeutics to correct this genetic defect.”

The SCTM has also developed a new therapy targeting chromosome 1-directed AMD and is preparing to initiate clinical trials—the first step toward FDA approval.

Learn more about the SCTM at medicine.utah.edu/ophthalmology/research/centers/sctm/

Watch Dr. Hageman discuss the SCTM’s invaluable eye tissue repository at genetherapylive.com/View/Importance-of-donor-resources-hageman
Heart of the Lion Courier Program

After a longer than anticipated hiatus, our Heart of the Lion Courier Program is back! We appreciate your patience as we temporarily suspended the program out of an abundance of caution. If you are interested in resuming delivery operations, please contact Wade McEntire at wade.mcentire@hsc.utah.edu to schedule driver training and orientation.

Due to the ongoing concerns for large gatherings, at this time we do not have a date for our annual recognition dinner. We will reach out with a proposed date as soon as appropriate.

Wade McEntire
Utah Lions Eye Bank

Bereavement Support Groups

For bereavement support group information, please contact the University of Utah College of Nursing

801.585.9522
healthcare.utah.edu/caring-connections

We would love to share your story.

If you are the recipient of a cornea, or have a story of a donor that you would like to share, please let us know. Email uleb.familyservices@hsc.utah.edu or just use the QR code!

MYTH: Donating eyes for research doesn’t restore sight to anyone.

FACT: Donating eyes for research can potentially help thousands of people regain their sight, as research on glaucoma, retinal disease, eye complications of diabetes and other sight disorders helps to advance the discovery of the cause and effects of these conditions. This can then lead to new treatments and cures.

A COMMUNITY OF COMPASSION

Building Hope • Restoring Sight • Changing Lives

EyeDonationMonth.org

UTAH LIONS EYE BANK
utaheyebank.org | uleb@hsc.utah.edu

Scan the QR code to see our job openings. Come join our team!
Financial Gifts for Sight

The Utah Lions Eye Bank thanks the following individuals for their generous financial donations July 2021 – October 2021:

Milton and Emily Anderson
Wells L. and Coleen T. Bagley
Van Bass
Richard and Sharon Bretzing
Madelyn Brownell
in honor of my team called Forever Vision
Doris Buckholtz
Alaina Burrows
Josephine Burton
Capture Lifetimes
in honor of my team called Forever Vision

Donna and John C. Cole
Joseph and Nancy Cook
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Manuel G. and Lupita Q. Vegas
Sheila Van Wagoner
Nancy and Stephen Williams
John Zudis

Please use the enclosed envelope or QR code to make a donation in memory of, or in honor of, a loved one. Thank you for your support and generosity.

Do your little bit of good where you are; it’s those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world. – Desmond Tutu