



The Discovery Eye Foundation supports cutting-edge research related to sight-threatening eye diseases and their treatments.

Supporting vision-saving research at the University of California, Irvine's Gavin Herbert Eye Institute since 2002.

Thanksgiving 2025

New Grant Program Funds Groundbreaking Research

First grantee will continue DEF's mitochondrial legacy

The Discovery Eye Foundation has launched a new grant program to support pioneering vision research. At a time when research funding is in jeopardy, DEF is stepping in with bridge funding to turn scientific breakthroughs into real hope for people living with vision loss and eye disease. The initial grants, in honor of DEF's late research director, Dr. M. Cristina Kenney, are \$50,000 bridge funds to allow scientists to gather data for a major grant from the National Institutes of Health or other granting agency.

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The 2025 Cristina Kenney Research Grant has been awarded to Gulab Zode, PhD, whose glaucoma research project, "Targeting Mitochondrial Autophagy Quality Control to Prevent Neurodegeneration in Glaucoma," is being conducted at the Bronson Center for Translational Vision Research in the Gavin Herbert Eye Institute at the University of California, Irvine.

Glaucoma is treated by lowering eye pressure, but many patients continue to lose vision, because the nerve cells that carry visual information to the brain, called retinal ganglion cells (RGCs), continue to die. These cells rely on tiny "power plants" — mitochondria — to generate the energy needed to send signals along long nerve fibers.

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DEF Adopts Refocused Strategic Direction

Earlier this year, Discovery Eye Foundation's board of directors voted to adopt a refocused strategic direction that builds on our history of supporting vision-saving work and addresses the changing state of research funding in the United States.

"We have been at the forefront of supporting research and education around vision and eye disease for more than 50 years," says Roni Cohen Leiderman, PhD, DEF board strategic advisor. "As we look at recent changes in NIH funding, we realized we can use our legacy and reputation in the eye-research landscape to do more to fund vitally important vision-saving research."

The board settled on four strategic priorities:

- 1. Advance vision-saving research.**
- 2. Prioritize funding projects in:**
 - Glaucoma
 - Age-related macular degeneration
 - Mitochondrial-related vision loss
 - Keratoconus
 - Other high-priority vision-saving research
- 3. Focus on the Discovery Eye Foundation Legacy Society** to fund essential research, and create a recognition program to steward and honor planned-giving donors.
- 4. Allocate emergency research grants** for startup and bridge funding to address new funding gaps. (Read about the first of these grants in our cover story.)

"This integrated strategy preserves DEF's position for a committed, long-term impact in vision-saving research with a strong focus on our Legacy Society," says DEF President and Medical Director Dr. Anthony Nesburn. "Building on the groundbreaking work of our late Research Director M. Cristina Kenney and the many researchers we have funded in the past, our foundation will continue to support scientific excellence and strengthened partnerships with a resilient, engaged donor community."



Give the gift of sight with a tribute donation to DEF.
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DEF Board Chair Jack Schoellerman is a Patient First

Jack Schoellerman jokes that he was drafted into the world of vision research. The Los Angeles native developed keratoconus (KC) when he was a teenager in the 1960s, but it took several years and several doctors before he was properly diagnosed.

“Even doctors didn’t know what it was,” Schoellerman says. “And in those days, it was viewed as a situation that could actually lead to blindness — that your corneas could advance to a stage where they would rupture.

“I had to really fight the system to get a good diagnosis; that left me with an understanding of what a patient with any kind of visual problem goes through.”

Schoellerman never wants someone with an eye disease to feel as alone as he felt when he first developed KC. Things started to change when his wife, Katy, happened to see an ad in the *LA Times* for a seminar at a new foundation. The DEF seminar was Schoellerman’s first encounter with the organization and the first time he met DEF Medical Director Dr. Anthony Nesburn. He dove in head first, helping to form the National Keratoconus Foundation, which became an educational program of DEF.



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A lawyer by training, Schoellerman spent much of his career as a business consultant, and he brought his broad skill set to the DEF board of directors. He later became president and chair of the board.

“I was asking: ‘What can we do to help people through the day? How can we provide a forum? Can we provide good information?’” he says. “And then, ‘Could we actually do

some of the research and/or support the research?’

“I’ve always been there with the idea that I’m a patient first. As we get into academic settings, and we’re talking to the optical companies, I’m sitting there as the patient. I am not a medical professional. I am not a scientist. Mostly I come from the ‘I’ve tried everything, and people need help’ point of view.”

Schoellerman believes in the power of community, both patient communities and research communities. He was pivotal in partnering DEF and its programs with University of California, Irvine, and developing them as part of the Gavin Herbert Eye Institute in the early 2000s.

DEF’s future is in “protecting vision against whatever challenge there is,” he says, noting that the board of directors is actively working on a new strategic initiative to help address an uncertain research atmosphere in the U.S.

“There has clearly never been a time when continuing funding to give researchers and academics the ability to do their work has been more important,” Schoellerman says. “We are up for that challenge.”

New Grant Program

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In glaucoma, these mitochondria can become damaged. Normally, the cell's cleanup system removes damaged mitochondria, keeping the nerve healthy. But when this fails, defective mitochondria pile up inside the cell. These block the "transport highways" inside the nerve fiber, preventing vital supplies from reaching where they are needed. Over time, this traffic jam causes the nerve cells to die, leading to vision loss.

Zode's research will test whether a new pharmaceutical treatment can switch on the cell's cleanup system to remove the damaged mitochondria, restore transport and keep RGCs

alive. By improving the health of these nerve cells, he aims to protect vision in glaucoma patients, especially those who continue to lose sight despite well-controlled eye pressure.

Zode had been working directly with DEF's research director, Dr. M. Cristina Kenney, a world-renowned expert on mitochondria, before she died. "Dr. Kenney had a good approach to making mitochondria healthy," he says. "My work is from a different angle, but the end point is the same. I believe I am carrying on Dr. Kenney's mitochondrial work, and I am grateful that this grant enables me to keep doing that."

ASK THE EYE DOCTOR

How Can I Relieve Dry Eye?



Dry eye is a chronic condition that can significantly affect daily life, causing discomfort and blurry vision. Fortunately, several simple yet effective strategies can help you manage your symptoms and improve your eye comfort:

- One of the most effective home remedies is the regular application of warm compresses. This easy practice soothes the eyes and improves the quality of natural tears.
- Another crucial step is the regular use of artificial tears. These over-the-counter drops are designed to lubricate the eyes and replenish moisture. Using them consistently can provide immediate relief from dryness.
- Finally, frequent blinking is essential, especially when using a computer. Blinking helps to spread the tear film evenly across the eye's surface, preventing tear evaporation.

If these measures are not enough to alleviate your symptoms, consult with an ophthalmologist. They can assess your condition and recommend further treatments, such as prescription medications or tear plugs. —*Kristin Nesburn, MD*



VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Your ongoing support of DEF fills us with gratitude. Please consider joining our Vision Legacy Society, dedicated to preserving and advancing our mission to safeguard vision through groundbreaking research, patient education and transformative treatments.

By participating in our estate-planning initiative, your generous contribution will leave a lasting legacy in your name, ensuring the preservation of eyesight for you and your family and for future generations.

For more information, visit discoveryeye.mylegacygift.org.