CASEY EYE Institute
OHSU

F.Y. eye
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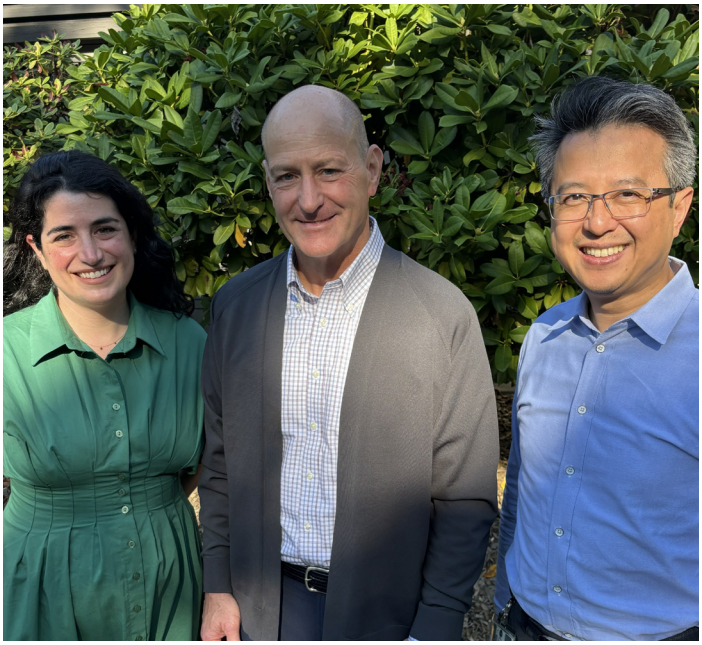
Casey Eye patient establishes fellowship after OHSU saves his eyesight

There's a river in southern Montana — the Stillwater — that spills down from the Beartooth Mountains and cuts across the rugged prairie landscape.

It's one of Joe Whittinghill's favorite places. Late last September as summer yielded to autumn, he stood in the Stillwater's shallow stream, and he paused. He looked at the fly fishing rod in his hand. He saw the rocks beneath the rippling current. He gazed up and down the meandering river, at and through the layers of cottonwood trees, and beyond toward the alpine.

"I thought, 'Boy, it would really be a sad day if I wasn't able to see this,'" Whittinghill said.



▲ Left to right: Ophthalmic Genetics Fellow Dr. Emily Levine, Joe Whittinghill, and Dr. Paul Yang.

Supporting the Future

It was 10 years prior, in 2015, when Whittinghill began experiencing worrying symptoms with his sight. By 2016, his peripheral vision and night vision had been almost entirely compromised. Had it not been for the OHSU Casey Eye Institute, a rare autoimmune eye disease would have stripped Whittinghill entirely of his ability to see. His experience at OHSU inspired his establishment of a one-year fellowship in Ophthalmic Genetics, which will help support the next generation of physicians training at OHSU and the Casey Eye Institute.

Casey Eye patient, page 2

Casey Eye Patient, from page 1

"If I had not ended up at OHSU, I would've lost my eyesight," Whittinghill said. "One of the reasons we're doing what we're doing with this fellowship is to allow them to really work on these genetic and autoimmune-related and cancer-related eye diseases so that other people will benefit."

A winding journey to a difficult diagnosis

Whittinghill's health journey began in Seattle, where he resides. When his symptoms started, he first saw a few local physicians before being referred to eye specialists at the University of Washington. Despite several ocular and genetic tests, no one could pinpoint the cause behind Whittinghill's progressive eyesight loss.

"If not for these specialists in Seattle going above and beyond and helping me get referred to the next group of people, I probably would've lost my eyesight," Whittinghill said. "They said, 'We've got to figure out what's causing this,' and that's when I was referred to Dr. Mark Pennesi and the genetics department at OHSU."

Mark Pennesi, M.D., Ph.D., is a professor of ophthalmology at the OHSU School of Medicine and an expert in degenerative retinal disorders. Soon after Whittinghill arrived at OHSU, he also met with Paul Yang, M.D., Ph.D., chief of the Paul H. Casey Ophthalmic Genetics Division and the Martha and Eddie Peterson Endowed Professor at the Casey Eye Institute. Initially, they, too, were stumped by the mysterious malady that was threatening

▲ The West Fork of the Stillwater River. Photo courtesy Joe Whittinghill.

Whittinghill's vision. Together, though, the two physicians were able to come to a definitive — albeit rare — diagnosis.

Whittinghill had non-paraneoplastic autoimmune retinopathy (npAIR), a rare autoimmune disease in which the body's immune system produces antibodies that target the eye's retina and retinal photoreceptor processes.

Whittinghill had a diagnosis, and when he learned Yang was one of the few physicians in the country studying npAIR, he was struck by the chain of events that led to it.

> "If I had not ended up at OHSU, I would've lost my eyesight. One of the reasons we're funding this fellowship is to allow the team to work on genetic autoimmune-related and cancer-related eye diseases so that others will benefit."
>
> – Joe Whittinghill

"I still have that email from Dr. Yang with this breakthrough that we have a diagnosis," Whittinghill said. "He's one of the few people studying this, which is pretty stunning. All these doctors taking extra steps to find someone who has seen this after you keep hearing that none of your tests are coming back conclusive and that we're really having a tough time finding a diagnosis, it was a big deal."

Supporting fellowships supports better care

Whittinghill began treatment with intravenous immunoglobulin, which helped protect the retinal proteins from his immune system. After a while, Rituximab, an antibody medication, was added to his treatment plan. Between the two, his vision loss has stopped progressing and is now stable.

Reflecting on his experience at OHSU, Whittinghill recalls the fellows in both Pennesi and Yang's groups. The thought of helping train the next generation of physicians who can push genetic ophthalmology forward inspired him to give back. "The fellows added so much value to my experience over the course of my time," he said. "They were picking up on things and adding to discussions and problem solving, looking through treatment options and test results right alongside the doctors. I was just so impressed to see this standard of care. There is a need for more volume, being able to see more people, to help advance the research that's going on at OHSU."

The fellowship in Ophthalmic Genetics that Whittinghill established adds to the Casey Eye Institute's legacy of philanthropy making a difference in the future of health care. His vision was saved in part because of the foundation of care that philanthropy has built. Adding to it, Whittinghill says, felt significant.

"It feels exciting to be a part of participating with others who saw the need and stepped up to do something," he said. "So much of the excellence and the breadth of the care that's happening has been in part funded through private support. When you go to Casey Eye, you can feel how important private support has been to that institute."

Letter From the Director

This year marks Casey Eye Institute's 35th anniversary. When we opened our doors in 1991 with the Casey family's generous support, we were a regional eye center with big ambitions. Today, we are internationally recognized for our clinical care, research, education, and outreach. Our explosive growth over the past 35 years reflects countless people working hard to honor the Casey vision.

Even as we celebrate this milestone, we remain focused on our mission to advance vision research and patient care. Eye diseases continue to affect millions of people, robbing them of their independence and quality of life. The work we do today determines whether someone decades from now will retain their vision or lose it. This is why maintaining momentum in vision research is so crucial.

Casey's success is built on an incredible foundation. Kenneth Swan, M.D., created our region's first academic eye department in 1945. Frederick Fraunfelder, M.D., persevered to move it into a freestanding institute in 1991. Joe Robertson, M.D., MBA, whom we lost in September, had a vision of national prominence and empowered us to make bold leaps forward. David Wilson, M.D., invested in gene therapy and imaging that put Casey on the international map. These leaders inspire us every day to continue pushing the boundaries of vision care for the next 35 years.

Through expanded telehealth services, advanced imaging and vision health navigators working directly in Oregon communities, we've expanded our mission of providing high-quality eye care far beyond the Portland area. While we embrace new technologies like artificial intelligence, we remain committed to a humanistic approach. Technology is an important clinical and research aid, but it will never replace caring for patients as we would care for our family and friends.

▲ Left to right: Andreas K. Lauer, M.D., and David Huang, M.D., Ph.D.

Casey's strength has always been our collaborative spirit, encompassing clinicians, researchers, nurses, technicians, and administrative staff who all work together to provide the best eye care to every patient. We are grateful to the donors who make our programs possible. Your philanthropic support enables us to pursue innovative research, provide compassionate care, and train the next generation of vision scientists and clinicians.

Thirty-five years in, we're just getting started. Thank you for standing with us and making our work possible.

Warmly,

Andreas K Lauer MD

Andreas K. Lauer, M.D.
Director, Casey Eye Institute
Chair & Professor, Department of Ophthalmology
Margaret Thiele-Petti and August Petti
Endowed Chair

David Huang

David Huang, M.D., Ph.D.
Associate Director, Casey Eye Institute
Professor of Ophthalmology and
Biomedical Engineering
Wold Family Endowed Chair in Ophthalmic Imaging

Faculty Spotlight:

Alison Skalet, M.D., Ph.D .

Professor of ophthalmology
Paul H. Casey Chair in Ocular Oncology,
Casey Eye Institute, School of Medicine
OHSU Casey Eye Institute, School of Medicine

My journey to becoming a doctor started when I was a child," says Dr. Alison Skalet. Her curiosity about medicine began in her grandmother's attic, where she discovered stacks of nursing magazines. "I fell in love with science and medicine and knew that was what I wanted to do."

At Tulane University, she studied pre-med and music (she loves to sing). She once planned to be a general cancer doctor. "Cancer touches everyone. My grandmother had cancer when I was young, and I was fascinated by cancer biology." But during her M.D./Ph.D. training, she realized she loved surgery. "Ophthalmology combines the skillset of a surgeon with the mindset of an oncologist."

Now one of only a few ocular oncologists in the nation, Skalet treats eye cancers in both adults and children. "I like fixing things when I can," she says. "But I especially value the long relationships I develop with many patients—some I've known for 15 years. We meet at a stressful time in their lives, and we often form a lasting bond."

Her research with OHSU colleagues focuses on new ways to diagnose and treat eye cancers, including ocular melanoma and retinoblastoma,

▲ Alison Skalet, M.D., Ph.D.

using blood tests and advanced imaging. "I hope that 20 years from now, I'm treating this disease completely differently," she says. "I want treatments that cure this cancer while preserving vision."

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>
> – Alison Skalet, M.D., Ph.D.

Despite the challenges of providing cancer care, Dr. Skalet finds deep satisfaction in working with her team at Casey. "I know we make a meaningful difference for patients," she says. "My clinical team takes good care from the first phone call through every follow-up treatment—and patients are genuinely grateful, which makes a huge difference."

1991 – 2026

Celebrating 35 Years of Vision at OHSU Casey Eye Institute

▲ Elizabeth and Thomas Gewecke

ELIZABETH AND THOMAS GEWECKE

Donors

"After our son was diagnosed with an ocular melanoma, we consulted with doctors across the country. Everyone we talked with guided us right back to Oregon.

Dr. Alison Skalet and her team at Casey Eye Institute is one of the best in country, and the care they provide is life changing. Clinic, surgery, research, all in one place, all world-class, all in Oregon.

We support Casey Eye Institute so Dr. Skalet's work can continue to lead the way in ocular oncology. We are forever grateful."

What Vision Means to Me is a storytelling series that celebrates 35 Years of Vision at Casey Eye Institute. From exam rooms to research labs, patients who inspire us, and alumni who carry Casey's values into their own communities, it's clear that what we do changes lives. **We invite you to read more photo essays through the QR code.**

▲ Yifan Jian, Ph.D.

YIFAN JIAN, PH.D.

Researcher, Associate Professor of Ophthalmology and Biomedical Engineering

"I thought being able to visualize living cells in a human was one of the coolest things I could imagine, so that's what drew me to pursue high-resolution retinal imaging research as a career.

One of the systems I created was designed to image the retinas of premature babies at risk of retinopathy of prematurity, a major cause of childhood blindness. It wasn't until we started using the prototype with real patients that we understood how difficult this disease is to see and diagnose. Comparing our images to what was available at the time made it clear how useful the new technology could be to help doctors treat these babies. Seeing the impact firsthand made me appreciate how well integrated translational research and clinical care are at Casey Eye Institute, and that what we do really matters.

Because my research focuses mostly on very young children, I think that if we could do something now to help save their vision for a lifetime, that really means the world to me. Seeing how patients' lives are impacted by our research propels us to discover methods to make the technology better, more accessible, and more affordable.

The amount of research that has been done at the Casey Eye Institute is tremendous. So many leaders in the field are here, strengthening Casey's legacy every day. Vision is one of our most important senses, and anything we can do to preserve, improve, or rescue it is important."

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