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Giving Back for the Gift of Sight: Barbara and Donald Jonas Support New Stem Cell Research



Philanthropy is one of the most powerful ways for patients to thank physicians for their care. But the major gift that Donald and Barbara Jonas have dedicated to support the research of Stephen H. Tsang, M.D., Ph. D. is more than an expression of gratitude. It is an investment in the likelihood that within a few years, Dr. Tsang's groundbreaking stem cell research will lead to a cure for degenerative retinal diseases, especially the one affecting Mr. Jonas.

For the past decade, Donald Jonas has been living with Late Onset Retinal Dystrophy (LORD), a rare hereditary condition that destroys the cells responsible for peripheral vision and depth perception. "I can see looking ahead, but if I'm on the golf course and there's a ball six inches to the side of my shoe, I can't see it,"

said Mr. Jonas, a retired retail executive who, together with his wife Barbara, has a long history of philanthropic involvement with the arts, education, nursing and medical causes.

When he learned of Dr. Tsang's research for a therapy to treat the disease that has been destroying his sight, he knew he had to help. He was determined to do everything he could to spare others from the progressive vision loss that has marked the past decade of his life.

"This is something that I feel strongly about, especially when I think of younger people who could possibly have a cure in their lifetime," Mr. Jonas said. "It is gratifying to think our contribution may in some way help others from suffering the loss of vision."

Dr. Tsang, the László Bitó Associate Professor of Ophthalmology, and Pathology & Cell Biology at Columbia University Medical Center, has been testing two promising treatments for degenerative retinal diseases. The treatment that he hopes will ultimately cure LORD involves injecting induced pluripotent stem (iPS) cells, which are generated from human skin biopsies, directly underneath the retinas of five-day-old, genetically engineered mice. Cells that are pluripotent can develop into any type of cell to help rebuild or otherwise aid organs and tissues throughout the body, such as the brain, heart, and even the retina. Dr. Tsang's goal is to use skin cells from LORD patients to cultivate iPS cells, and then to transplant these cells

back into the patients. “Because the cells come from the same patient, the hope is that you won’t have to worry about rejection,” Dr. Tsang said. Mr. Jonas proved a willing donor. While undergoing surgery for basal cell carcinoma, he provided a sample of normal adjacent skin tissue for the cultivation of stem cells. The Food and Drug Administration does not yet allow iPS cell transplantation in humans; however, the couple’s gift will allow Dr. Tsang to prepare data for human trials. “With the Jonas gift, we are trying to bring the future of medicine closer.”

The Jonases know that a cure for LORD may not arrive in their lifetime. But as Mrs. Jonas said, “We have total confidence in Dr. Tsang. We know he will do excellent work that will benefit untold numbers of patients in the future.”

Nationwide Impact, Columbia Roots

Dr. Tsang’s research is one of many projects at Columbia that owe their support to the Jonases’ commitment to research, training, and practice needs in today’s healthcare arena, particularly in nursing and mental health.

Among the couple’s most noted programs is The Jonas Center for Nursing Excellence, founded in 2006, during the country’s unprecedented nursing shortage. The Center is one of three initiatives of The Barbara and Donald Jonas Family Fund, which was created with more than \$44 million, raised through an auction of a portion of the family’s noted contemporary art collection. Columbia University’s School of Nursing and New York- Presbyterian Hospital were among the Center’s founding partner-recipients. In 2008, the Jonas Center turned its attention to the need for qualified faculty to train the next generation of nurses. It launched the Jonas Nurse Leaders Scholars Program, a groundbreaking national initiative, supporting nursing faculty and clinical leader training of doctoral level nursing candidates. The program now includes more than 200 scholars in all 50 states through partnerships with nearly 90 schools of nursing.

Extending the Focus to Veterans

In 2012, the Jonases focused their philanthropic efforts on veterans. They created the Jonas Veterans Healthcare Program, which is addressing veterans’ most pressing health issues by expanding the field of qualified caregivers through scholarships to 54 doctoral-level nursing candidates in 21 states— again, including two at Columbia University.

Spurring Innovation in Mental Health Care

Mental health is a cornerstone of the Jonases’ giving, such as through the Barbara Jonas Psychiatric Hospitalist at New York-Presbyterian Hospital. A longtime mental health advocate and former practicing psychotherapist, Mrs. Jonas recognized that overlooked mental health needs complicate care in many hospitals, worsening response to treatment, lengthening stays or affecting recovery. Herbert Pardes, M.D., Vice Chairman and CEO of the hospital when the position was created, said, “Adding a dedicated psychiatric hospitalist has helped further ensure that we can appropriately address all patient needs.” Additionally, the Jonases have funded the Barbara Jonas Institute for the Study and Treatment of Children at Risk at New York- Presbyterian, and the Columbia University Teen Screen Program.

Columbia University has been at the center of many of the Jonases’ philanthropic initiatives—all designed to improve health by supporting faculty, investigators and students. “We are immensely proud to partner with Columbia as we advance our shared passions and vision to improve health care, especially for the most underserved populations.”