

McPHERSON
EYE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

2025

ANNUAL REPORT

20TH ANNIVERSARY

2026

CALENDAR



McPherson Eye Research Institute

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Celebrants at the McPherson ERI's 20th Anniversary Dinner in May 2025.

From the Director

Dear Friends,

In 2025, the McPherson Eye Research Institute turned twenty. We aren't old, but we aren't kids anymore either. That may sound odd to say of an institute, but like any entity, research organizations also grow and mature with time. Over the years, we have added many cutting-edge scientists and innovators to our ranks, fostered countless research collaborations, and gained critical, project-driving resources through the support of donors, campus leadership, foundations, and state and federal funding. Gratifyingly, these advances have helped the McPherson ERI become one of the world's largest and most comprehensive university-based vision research centers in just two decades. What we are most proud of, however, is not

the quantity of research our members perform, but rather its quality and impact.

And we have barely scratched the surface of what we can do. There is an ever-present need for new and better therapies and technologies to preserve, restore, or maximize visual function, which is why, on our 20th anniversary, we're looking forward rather than backward. In these first few pages, we introduce you to the future of vision research through the stories of some of the many trainee scientists who currently work in McPherson ERI labs or who recently graduated and began their independent careers elsewhere. These bright, young individuals will shape the future of vision research in Wisconsin and around the world.

This year's calendar illustrations also have a futuristic tinge to reflect our focus on what's to come. For more than a decade, our talented graphic designer,

Malin Nordlund, has crafted calendar and *InSights* covers that offer creative interpretations of an array of research themes.

Last summer, a collection of Malin's work was exhibited in the McPherson ERI's Mandelbaum & Albert Family Vision Gallery, and we are pleased to feature her thoughtful and stunning illustrations as our monthly 2026 calendar images. We are incredibly grateful for your interest and support, which has been the primary fuel for our growth to this point and will continue to push and inspire us in the years to come. Have a wonderful 2026.

David M. Gamm, MD, PhD

Professor, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences
RRF Emmett A. Humble Distinguished Director, McPherson ERI
Sandra Lemke Trout Chair in Eye Research

LOOKING DOWN THE ROAD

Vision Scientists and Technologies for the Coming Decades

Discovery starts with researchers choosing a problem to tackle and then thoughtfully applying their knowledge, ingenuity, and resources—often with the assistance of other scientists, including trainees in their labs. In the pages below, we shine a much-deserved light on these graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. As you will see, the future is in good hands.

Human pluripotent stem cell-derived photoreceptors (visible in red, with their nuclei outlined in blue) arranged on a microscopic scaffold developed as part of a collaboration between McPherson ERI member labs (Gamm, Ma, and Gong) to help protect cells during transplantation into the retina.

Allison Ludwig DVM/PhD

Comparative Ophthalmology Resident

| School of Veterinary Medicine |
Gamm Lab, 2017-2021



Over the past decade at UW-Madison as a vet student, PhD student, and now veterinary ophthalmology resident, I've had an exhilarating time working alongside leaders in cell and gene therapy as new treatments move closer to the clinic. The McPherson ERI has provided an inspiring, collaborative community of vision scientists who are not only passionate about developing sight-saving therapies but also mentoring future researchers. The community outreach, communication training, and scientific conference travel support I received as a MERI trainee have fundamentally shaped my understanding of the responsibility we as scientists have for communicating and sharing our research with the broader public.

I completed my PhD training in the Gamm lab in 2021 studying pluripotent stem cell-based therapies aimed at treating blinding retinal diseases like retinitis pigmentosa, and it has been deeply rewarding to be part of the scientific community developing cell therapies now advancing into human clinical trials.

In my current role as a veterinary ophthalmology resident, I treat naturally occurring eye diseases in pets—like cataracts, uveitis, glaucoma, and inherited retinal degeneration—that also serve as valuable models for understanding similar diseases in humans. Looking ahead, I plan to help teach the next generation of vision scientists and continue integrating clinical insight, patient-focused outcomes, and regenerative medicine research to advance new treatments for vision loss and improve clinical outcomes for human and animal patients alike.

Khadijeh Masumnia-Bisheh PhD

Postdoctoral Research Associate

| WAIVS Lab, 2014-today



When people think about engineering's impact on daily life, high-tech devices such as smartphones, self-driving cars, or satellites usually come to mind. Yet medical devices, despite being less visible in our day-to-day lives, play a direct and powerful role in people's health. This is what excites me most about my work in the Wisconsin Advanced Imaging of the Visual System (WAIVS) lab at MERI. With a PhD in electrical engineering and a background in computational electromagnetics and optics, I've been part of building and improving a cutting-edge imaging system that allows us to see the retina at the cellular level. We are advancing both the hardware and the software for this purpose, and one of the most rewarding aspects of my work is seeing eye specialists' reactions when they view unprecedented images of their patients' retinas.

In simple terms, my work focuses on creating sharper images of the back of the eye, so doctors can see individual cells. This is important because many vision-threatening diseases begin at the cellular level and being able to detect these changes early, without invasive procedures, makes it possible to diagnose problems earlier, monitor diseases more accurately, and devise more effective treatments.

My experience at MERI has shaped my career goals by providing me with a direct connection between engineering innovation and patient care. Moving forward, I aim to continue developing advanced imaging technologies that can transform how vision disorders are detected and treated.

Melissa Schoenlein PhD

Assistant Professor, Psychology | High
Point University | Schloss Lab, 2018-2024



I am so grateful for my experiences with the McPherson ERI during my time as a PhD student in the Schloss Visual Reasoning Lab. MERI seminars introduced me to the many facets of vision research across disciplines. Poster sessions and seminars helped me practice communicating my own research to diverse academic audiences, which became directly beneficial when applying to liberal arts institutions with interdisciplinary hiring committees. And the Science Expedition events instilled a passion in me for communicating science to communities. After each of these events, I always felt refueled with excitement about vision science and that my own research and contributions were valued. These experiences were a highlight of my graduate studies and a key contributor to my career.

Today, I try to instill that same level of appreciation and excitement for vision science with my undergraduate research students. My work continues to focus on the role of color in our experiences, specifically how we form associations between colors and concepts. For example, when we imagine concepts like daisies or sunflowers, we likely first think of whites and yellows, which are often the colors of these flowers' petals. These flowers also typically have green stems, but "green" does not come to mind quite as quickly. Our research aims to try to understand how people form such patterns of associations based on how they interact and respond to their visual environments, including which aspects of our visual environments are prioritized (e.g., the flower petals), which are overlooked (e.g., the flower stems), and why this might be the case. Understanding the source of these associations can help us better predict people's actual associations for a variety of colors and concepts, which can then be used to improve visual communication, such as designing graphs, charts, and maps.

Jake Khoussine's research technique of patch-clamp electrophysiology wrangles retinal neurons to understand the properties that enable high-fidelity signal transmission from the eye to the brain. When a genetic mutation disrupts this capability, neurons malfunction and vision degrades. His goal is to leverage the natural resiliency of neurons to direct neuronal repair and vision recovery.

Jacob Khoussine

MD-PhD Candidate, Medicine and Cellular & Molecular Biology

| Hoon Lab, 2021-2025



I've long been fascinated by how the nervous system develops and functions. In Dr. Mrinalini Hoon's lab, the opportunity to dive deep into this interest helped me hone my skills as an experimentalist and uncover insights into the structural and functional architecture of the retina. My PhD research used CRISPR genetics to silence electrical signaling in a critical retinal pathway, providing a model to unravel the mechanisms that both potentiate and limit neural resilience. Neuroplasticity is remarkable, and one of my long-term career goals is to harness plasticity in the treatment of genetic eye disease, especially in pediatric populations.

As an MD-PhD candidate, I have been fortunate to collaborate with and learn from multiple MERI members across the clinical and research spectrum, enriching my inspiration with pragmatism. To deliver gene therapy delicately beneath a child's retina and see the magic of plasticity restore their vision is a guiding light for my clinician-scientist career. The mentorship and support from the McPherson Eye Research Institute not only helped me to conceive of this vision, but also equipped me to one day bring it to fruition.

My vision work over the next 2 years will primarily be dedicated to clinical training in ophthalmology, graduating from medical school and undertaking my ophthalmology residency. I hope to build on my PhD background through advanced retinal imaging to understand retinal structure and function and the process governing therapeutic efficacy in gene therapies.

Meha Kabra PhD

Scientist 1 | Pattnaik Lab, October 2018-today



Working in the McPherson Eye Research Institute (MERI) has been a transformative experience for me, both professionally and personally. As a Scientist I in the Department of Pediatrics and MERI, my current research focuses on developing therapeutic strategies using advanced tools like CRISPR genome engineering and anticodon-engineered tRNA. Our aim is to develop therapies for ion channel disorders and inherited retinal diseases, specifically Leber Congenital Amaurosis type 16 (LCA16), Congenital Stationary Night Blindness type 2 (CSNB2), and Best disease. In simple terms, we're using next generation tools to correct the disease phenotype either at the DNA or protein level, with the goal of restoring or preserving vision.

This work is crucial because understanding and correcting the root genetic causes of blindness could lead to long-lasting, curative treatments for patients who currently have limited options. MERI's collaborative environment has given me access to cutting-edge technologies and a network of vision scientists whose mentorship has deepened my commitment to translational research.

Mitra Farnoodian PhD

Assistant Professor, Department of Human Genetics | Amsterdam AMC
| Sheibani Lab, 2012-2017



My time at the McPherson Eye Research Institute and UW-Madison, where I worked in Dr. Nader Sheibani's lab, was a defining chapter in my career. I collaborated with clinician-scientists and researchers to address the complexities of retinal diseases, which deepened my understanding of translational research, refined my skills in designing rigorous, impactful studies, and led to fundamental discoveries that have clinical promise. Working in multidisciplinary teams, I gained critical insights into how collective efforts can accelerate breakthroughs, particularly for retinal pigment epithelium (RPE) dysfunction, a key driver of vision loss.

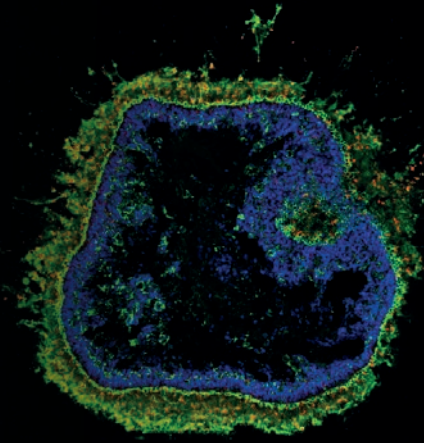
After my training at UW, I worked for nearly a decade at the National Eye Institute in Bethesda to develop noninvasive treatments for retinal degenerative disease. In 2025, I joined the Amsterdam University Medical Center as an Assistant Professor.

My professional mission is to elucidate the cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying retinal degenerative diseases, focusing on RPE-related pathologies, and develop targeted pharmacological, stem cell-based, and gene therapies for conditions lacking effective treatments. In particular, I seek to explore how cellular metabolism is disrupted in ocular tissues and translate these insights into therapies that improve patients' lives. Our vision is to bridge the bench-to-bedside gap, delivering innovative interventions for untreatable retinal conditions.

My experience here has solidified my goal of leading independent research that bridges molecular genetics and therapeutic development. In the future, I aim to expand our understanding of the genetic landscape of retinal diseases and develop targeted therapies that are safe, effective, and accessible. Vision is fundamental to quality of life, and I am passionate about contributing to breakthroughs that can help restore it.

Left, a close-up view of a cat retina several weeks after injection of a viral vector. The bright white glow proves that new genetic material was successfully delivered into the retinal ganglion cells, an essential step in future gene editing therapies. Image courtesy of Kazuya Oikawa, PhD.

Right, a lab-grown, stem cell-derived retinal organoid with photoreceptors visible in green and red along the outer perimeter. Image courtesy of the Gamm Lab.



Kazuya Oikawa BVSc, PhD

Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Surgical Sciences (SVM)

| McLellan Lab, 2021-today



The McLellan Lab at UW-Madison and the MERI community have been foundational to my research career in vision science. MERI's support, including trainee grants, enabled me to secure external research awards and firmly cemented my dedication to the vision research field.

My primary research work focuses on glaucoma, one of the leading causes of irreversible blindness worldwide. I study how to protect the vision-processing tissues, such as the retina, optic nerve, and brain, from damage caused by this disease. Understanding how these tissues degenerate in glaucoma is critical for saving sight. By leveraging my veterinary expertise and studying animals that naturally develop glaucoma (as people do), I hope to uncover key disease mechanisms and develop innovative cross-species treatments.

As a current veterinary ophthalmology resident, my goal is to become a veterinary ophthalmologist and vision scientist. It is important to me to implement a bench-to-bedside approach that advances clinical care for animals while pursuing the One Health mission: pioneering new strategies to prevent vision loss and improve therapies for both animals and people.

Steven Mayerl PhD

Scientist, FUJIFILM Cellular Dynamics, Inc. | Gamm Lab, 2016-2022



Ten years ago, I was thrilled to be accepted as a PhD student at UW-Madison, a world leader in stem cell research. I believed then, as I do now, that stem cells would shape the future of disease prevention and treatment. I was drawn to Dr. Gamm's work using hPSC-derived retinal cells to model and treat disease, and in 2016 I had the privilege of joining his lab. My graduate work focused on creating retinal organoid models of a retinitis pigmentosa (RP)-causing gene mutation called IMPG2-RP, derived from induced pluripotent stem cells (hPSCs). I was fortunate to be immersed in MERI's broad vision research community and gained an interdisciplinary perspective on the many approaches to preventing and treating blindness.

These experiences not only deepened my technical skills but strengthened my conviction that stem cell-based therapies could improve patients' quality of life. After graduation, I joined Fujifilm Cellular Dynamics, Inc., a company whose mission resonated deeply with my own. At Fujifilm, I have drawn on my training to help advance an hPSC-derived photoreceptor product to clinical trials for inherited retinal degenerative disorders. I remain committed to building on these experiences, working to bring new stem cell-based treatments to patients, and am extremely grateful for the mentorship and community within MERI that shaped my career path.

Lowell Thompson PhD

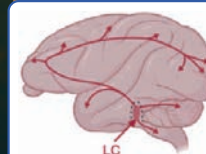
Postdoctoral Researcher | University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine | Rosenberg Lab, 2016-2022



My graduate research, conducted in the labs of Dr. Ari Rosenberg and Dr. Bas Rokers, investigated how the brain recreates 3D representations of the world using the 2D images captured by the eyes. The McPherson Eye Research Institute (MERI) offered a unique environment to interact with vision scientists across numerous departments. Seminars and symposiums provided opportunities to share my work with others who have a deep understanding of the eye itself but may have little knowledge of how the brain shapes what we see. MERI also offered competitive funding opportunities that allowed me to hone my grant writing skills and ultimately complete my thesis work.

As a visual neuroscientist, I primarily aim to understand how the brain processes images received by the eyes. My experience with MERI instilled an appreciation for a complementary process: how does the brain affect the eyes and the images they capture? I aim to better understand these relationships as a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Pennsylvania by examining the locus coeruleus (LC). The LC is a brain region linked to arousal and is implicated in neurodevelopmental disorders such as ADHD. My work focuses on how the LC enables us to flexibly use visual information depending on context by altering brain-wide activity and pupil diameter. The future of this work will rely heavily on interdisciplinary communities to guide our conclusions, as technology—such as eye tracking and virtual reality—advances to provide researchers with novel experimental approaches and data.

The locus coeruleus (LC), shown in a macaque monkey brain (below), is a small region in the pons with projections that spread across the cortex. LC activity, like pupil diameter, is linked to arousal and follows an inverted-U response curve where optimal cognitive performance is achieved with intermediate levels of activity.

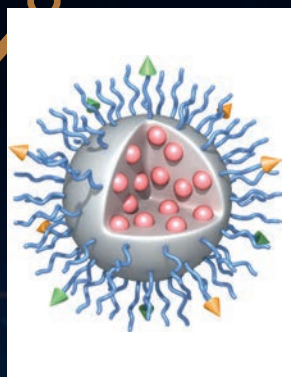
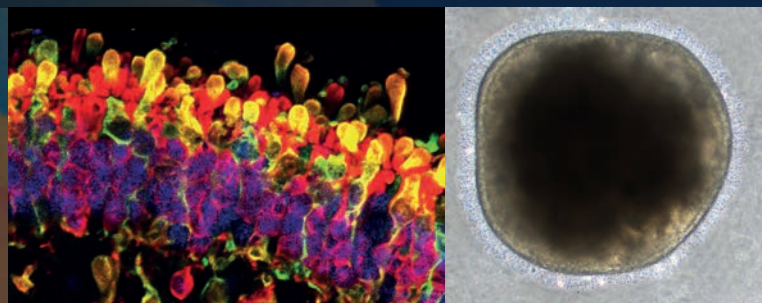


Future Tech

New technologies that drive breakthroughs in vision science can be found throughout McPherson ERI labs. Two technologies in particular—**stem cells** and **gene editing**—hold tremendous potential for restoring or preserving sight. MERI contains teams of scientists actively building and utilizing such technologies to combat a range of diseases.

UW-Madison has always been a world leader in **stem cell technology**, beginning with McPherson ERI member James Thomson, whose early work in the 1990s was the basis for numerous promising stem cell therapies now in development. Dr. Thomson's seminal discoveries paved the way for David Gamm's lab to invent methods to grow human retinal cells and tissues in a dish. Over the ensuing years, this technology was tested and adapted by Gamm and his UW-Madison and industry partners until it was approved for testing in people with advanced retinitis pigmentosa. The resulting first-in-the-world clinical trial started in 2025, and additional clinical trials aimed at AMD and other retinal degenerative diseases are slated to follow.

Below, close-up view and full view of stem cell-derived retinal organoids grown in the Gamm Lab. Images courtesy of the Gamm Lab.



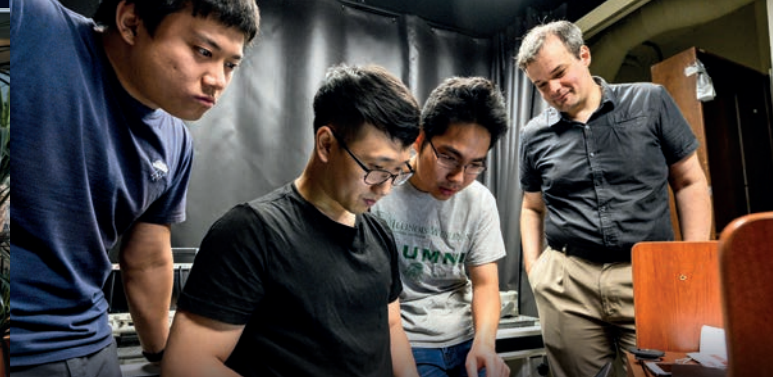
Shaoqin Gong, PhD, and the synthetic nanocapsule engineered in the Gong Lab. Image courtesy of the Gong Lab.



Gene editing, an even newer technology recognized for its potential to treat early and mid-stage genetic diseases, is the focus of MERI scientists who are part of the CRISPR Vision Program. Funded by a \$29 million NIH grant to UW-Madison, the project aims to develop genome editing therapeutics for two inherited retinal diseases, Leber congenital amaurosis and Best disease. Headed by MERI scientist Kris Saha, and aided by half a dozen MERI co-investigators, the CRISPR Vision team is using **synthetic nanoparticles**—designed and generated by MERI member Shaoqin Gong—to deliver gene mutation-correcting machinery directly to the retinal cells affected in these two conditions, as well as many others.

Other moonshot technologies are also actively being investigated in MERI labs. **Whole eye transplantation** was science fiction until recently, but now serious work has begun to make this exceedingly complex goal a reality. In 2024, the US government's ARPA-H agency directed \$125 million to a nationwide consortium of scientists, which included MERI members Robert Nickells and David Gamm, to systematically address the many challenges of human eye transplantation.

Of course, MERI engineers and computer scientists are also hard at work producing new technology to better diagnose, treat, and assist those with vision-threatening disorders. **Ocular imaging methods** have taken a giant leap forward with the development of the WAIVS (Wisconsin Advanced Imaging of Visual Systems)



Andreas Velten, PhD, with lab members. Velten's Computational Optics Group has developed non-line-of-sight cameras.

Project, which uses adaptive optics (or AO) to scan the retinas of living patients at a level of magnification and resolution previously unimaginable. As you might imagine, **artificial intelligence (AI)** is being employed in numerous MERI projects. Examples include those designed to increase the speed and accuracy of disease diagnosis or to improve health care access to rural and inner-city communities.

Other MERI engineers have invented **non-line-of-sight cameras** that “see” around corners (Andreas Velten lab) or **“smart glass”** that can recognize images without requiring sensors, circuits, or power sources (Zongfu Yu lab). Multiple applications for these technologies, ranging from medical to industrial, have already been envisioned for the future.

These are just a handful of examples of the innovative ideas and products that MERI scientists are actively working on. With over 200 researchers striving to improve human and animal vision, health, and function, you can rest assured there are many more breakthroughs to come.

Jeremy Rogers, PhD, principal investigator in the Wisconsin Advanced Imaging of Visual Systems (WAIVS) lab at UW-Madison.



McPherson Eye Research Institute



2024-
2025

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IN MEMORIAM DON GRAY



McPherson ERI sadly notes the passing of former Advisory Board member Don Gray in September 2025. Don shaped the Institute in many ways, as a friend and early advisor to McPherson ERI Founding Director Daniel Albert, and as an important UW Foundation supporter in his longtime position of Vice President for Principal Gifts. He is famous in (and beyond) UW-Madison circles for training a generation of development people and always being available for advice and encouragement. Most of all, Don is remembered as a wonderful person who really cared about others, which was clear to all who knew him.

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2024-
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- ☼ **Andreas Velten, PhD (beginning Summer 2025)** | Biostatistics & Medical Informatics, School of Medicine and Public Health | Electrical & Computer Engineering, College of Engineering



RETINA RESEARCH FOUNDATION CHAIRS AND PROFESSORSHIPS

Endowed positions funded by the Retina Research Foundation, founded by Dr. Alice McPherson in 1969, have been essential to the McPherson ERI's work since its beginning.



Ari Rosenberg PhD, Neuroscience
RRF Edwin and Dorothy Gamewell
Professor

As the newly appointed **RRF Edwin and Dorothy Gamewell Professor**, Dr. Rosenberg will advance research aimed at uncovering how the brain synthesizes retinal and oculomotor signals into perceptual representations of the three-dimensional world. This research reveals neurobiological principles that contribute to the richness of visual perception and has applications for understanding and treating age-related cognitive decline, autism, and retinal degenerative diseases.



Kevin Eliceiri PhD, Director/LOCI
Morgridge Institute for Research
RRF Walter H. Helmerich Research Chair

The Eliceiri lab develops computational imaging approaches to study the role of the cellular microenvironment in wound healing processes such as those that occur in the eye. **The RRF Walter H. Helmerich Research Chair** supports the development of novel multimodal imaging instrumentation for investigating dynamic cellular interactions, and the development of deep learning approaches for cell pattern analysis.

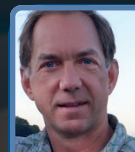


David Gamm
MD, PhD, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences
RRF Emmett A. Humble Distinguished
Directorship



Mrinalini Hoon
PhD, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences
RRF Rebecca Meyer Brown Professor

Through the support of the **RRF Rebecca Meyer Brown Professorship**, research in the Hoon lab is expanding our understanding of how retinal neurons respond to disease conditions associated with impaired visual input. Their studies combining structural and functional tools have shown that a certain amount of visual input is needed to provoke a response in retinal neurons. Below this level, deleterious consequences ensue that impair retinal output. This understanding can be utilized to formulate new therapies aimed at reinstating visual function.



Timothy Gomez
PhD, Neuroscience
RRF M. D. Matthews Research Professor

Over the past year, a new graduate student in the Gomez lab, Madison Dillerud, has made excellent progress toward identifying molecular changes that occur in photoreceptors as they age within retinal organoids. These changes may be responsible for age-related loss of photoreceptor plasticity. The lab is also preparing to examine changes that occur in photoreceptors at a protein level using mass spectrometry in collaboration with the Ge laboratory. With the help of the **RRF M.D. Matthews Professorship**, the goal is to improve the integration of transplanted stem cell-derived photoreceptors into patients with retinal degenerative disorders.



Krishanu Saha
PhD, Biomedical Engineering
RRF Kathryn and Latimer Murfee Chair

The Saha lab has made notable advances in the CRISPR Vision Program this year, backed by the **RRF Kathryn and Latimer Murfee Chair**, most notably in the development of injectable treatments for Best disease and Leber congenital amaurosis. Positive engagement with colleagues at Massachusetts and the FDA has accelerated this project, and plans are now in place to submit an investigational drug application to the FDA by 2028. New efforts this year included creating gene editing platform strategies to target a wide array of pathogenic mutations causing inherited retinal diseases affecting the retinal pigment epithelium.



Bikash Pattnaik
PhD, MPhil, Pediatrics
RRF Daniel M. Albert Chair

The Pattnaik Research Group focuses on advancing genomic medicine for childhood blindness caused by cellular ion channel dysfunction. After successfully developing gene therapies for KCNJ13-related diseases, their focus now is on newer forms of genome editing and engineered tRNA approaches to treat nonsense mutations, which account for nearly a quarter of all genetic diseases. Through innovative science and collaborative training, the **Daniel M. Albert Chair** allows the Pattnaik lab to translate discoveries from the bench to the bedside, restoring vision and improving lives.

The **RRF Emmett A. Humble Distinguished Directorship** has continuously supported the Gamm lab's efforts to generate photoreceptors (rods and cones) from human stem cell-derived retinal organoids for use in cell replacement therapies. Individuals with late-stage inherited retinal degenerations (such as retinitis pigmentosa, cone-rod dystrophies, and Usher syndrome) go blind because their photoreceptors die. This past year, in close collaboration with multiple industry partners including Ocular Therapeutics, Fujifilm Cellular Dynamics Inc., and BlueRock Therapeutics, they treated their first patient with these conditions as part of the BlueRock sponsored Phase 1/2a CLARICO trial. They are continuing to recruit and treat people for this trial at multiple sites, including a soon-to-be onboarded site at UW-Madison.

Sandra Lemke Trout Chair in Eye Research

Most macular conditions require replacement of both photoreceptors and retinal pigmented epithelium (RPE) cells to improve vision. In the past year, support from the **Sandra Lemke Trout Chair in Eye Research** has allowed the Gamm Lab to work on both scaffold- and non-scaffold-based strategies to deliver both RPE cells and photoreceptors to the subretinal space. Late-stage blinding disorders like age-related macular degeneration (AMD), Stargardt disease, Best disease, and choroideremia ultimately may all be treatable using a dual cell therapy such as this. In addition, they have embarked on a project that utilizes a new and exciting technology to more precisely control abnormal blood growth and swelling in the retina, which can be caused by many blinding conditions.



DAVID AND NANCY WALSH FAMILY PROFESSORSHIP IN VISION RESEARCH



Raunak Sinha PhD, Neuroscience

The **David and Nancy Walsh Family Professorship** has supported the Sinha lab's continued efforts to understand the specializations of neural circuit function in the retina, particularly in the central-most part of our eye, the fovea, which is responsible for our 20/20 vision. In 2025, they moved their project forward by (1) exploring regional differences in how photoreceptors and neural pathways process key properties of vision

such as contrast, and (2) uncovering how photoreceptor function matures in the fovea during development. This work serves as a benchmark for their collaborative efforts aimed at evaluating the functional authenticity of photoreceptors and neuronal connections in human stem cell-derived retinas. Such knowledge has immediate applications for cell replacement therapies and for modeling retinal degenerative diseases in a dish.



MONROE AND SANDRA TROUT CHAIRS

The three Chairs endowed by McPherson ERI friends Monroe and Sandra Trout are at the forefront of bringing new therapies for age-related macular degeneration to the clinic as part of the Trout AMD Project. The holder of the new fourth Trout Chair, the Monroe E. Trout Jr Chair in Eye Research, will be announced in the near future.



Akihiro Ikeda

DVM, PhD, Medical Genetics

Timothy William Trout Chair in Eye Research

The **Timothy William Trout Chair in Eye Research** has been instrumental in advancing the Ikeda lab's work on the influence of lipid metabolism and mitochondrial regulation on retinal aging and diseases. Using mouse models with accelerated retinal aging, they have shown that supplementation with docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) alleviates age-related retinal inflammation and degeneration. They also found that disruption of the protein DRP1 in photoreceptor cells alters mitochondrial dynamics and triggers age-related changes in neighboring retinal cells. These studies highlight how metabolic and mitochondrial pathways converge to shape retinal health across the lifespan.



Michael Altaweel

MD, FASRS, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences

Monroe E. Trout Chair in Eye Research

In mid-2025, Dr. Altaweel collaborated with his scientific partners to perform the first surgical placement of stem cell-derived photoreceptors in a patient's eye. This ongoing clinical trial is designed to assist patients with advanced retinitis pigmentosa. Development of a safe and reproducible surgical method to place photoreceptors and retinal pigment epithelial cells in the subretinal space was made possible by support from the **Monroe E. Trout Chair in Eye Research**. In addition to allowing Dr. Altaweel to obtain the equipment required to perform the surgery, the Chair allowed him to engage a consistent and talented surgical team at UW-Madison.



GRANT ACCELERATOR PROGRAM (GAP)

Early in 2025, the McPherson ERI introduced an exciting new grant program, the Grant Accelerator Program (GAP). The GAP program provides seed funding at a larger scale—\$50,000—than the Institute has awarded in the past, thanks to an outstanding gift from the Estate of Dr. Alice McPherson, and generous support from the Van Vreede McPherson ERI Greatest Needs Fund and the Robert A. Brandt Macular Degeneration Fund.

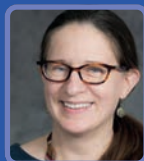
Seven projects were chosen from a large field of applicants in this first year:



Mrinalini Hoon, PhD (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences), to study the role of “ribbons,” a crucial structural component in the majority of retinal synapses, with implications for diseases, such as glaucoma, that are associated with the loss of these structures.



Colleen McDowell, PhD (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences) to test whether a substance called CGRP, released by sensory nerve fibers in the eye, can act as a therapeutic to improve fluid flow and reduce eye pressure.



Freya Mowat, BVSc, PhD (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, SMPH, and Surgical Sciences, SVM), to test the effectiveness of direct intravitreal injection of TZDs, an already-FDA-approved class of diabetes drugs, on a mouse model with AMD-like symptoms.

McPherson ERI Research Awards 2024-2025



Robert Nickells, PhD (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences), to examine whether damage in one eye causes a neurotoxic reaction in the astrocyte cells in the other eye, a potential risk factor for glaucoma.



Raunak Sinha, PhD (Neuroscience), to build up a picture of how sharp vision develops as primates mature in their early years, allowing for a more accurate examination of developmental and degenerative diseases.



Yuhang Zhao, PhD (Computer Sciences), to develop systems that will more closely match the specific needs of users of low vision technology.



Amitha Domalpally, MD, PhD (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences and the Wisconsin Reading Center) and **Jeremy Rogers, PhD** (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences) received the **Robert A. Brandt Macular Degeneration Award** to explore the “ellipsoid zone”—a layer visible on OCT imaging—in depth, to determine whether the loss of this zone seen in AMD truly correlates with a loss of photoreceptors and functional vision loss.



Grant Summit Program (GSP)



The **Grant Summit Program** continues to pay big dividends for McPherson ERI scientists. The Program awards up to \$10,000 to support revision and resubmission of well-scored grant applications that often need only a small amount of revision to receive major funding. Since its inception, the Grant Summit Program has awarded a total of \$138,201 to McPherson ERI scientists—and the resulting funding received from NIH and other sources totals \$5,609,079 (as of September 2025)—a forty-fold increase from the initial investments.

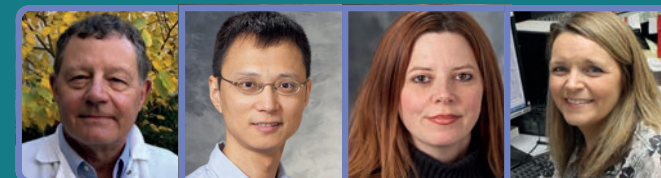
Five Grant Summit Awards of \$10,000 were given to McPherson ERI researchers in late 2024 and 2025:

✿ **Curtis Brandt, PhD**, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, *Mechanisms of Sensory Nerve Loss in HSV-1 Keratitis*

✿ **Xin Huang, PhD**, Neuroscience, *Neural Mechanisms Underlying Perceptual Organization*

✿ **Donna Neumann, PhD**, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, for two separate grant submissions: *Inhibiting Repair of the Herpes Simplex Virus Genome for Therapeutic Effect* and *A Chromatin Loop Controls the Expression of Anterograde Transport Genes during HSV-1 Latency*

✿ **Gillian McLellan, BVMS, PhD**, Surgical Sciences, SVM and Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, SMPH, *Novel Mouse Models to Elucidate the Role of LTBP2 in the Outflow Pathway*



L-R: Curtis Brandt, PhD; Xin Huang, PhD; Donna Neumann, PhD; Gillian McLellan, BVMS, PhD.

Kenzi Valentyn Vision Research Grants

Kenzi Valentyn Vision Research Grants are named in honor of a courageous young woman who fought a long battle with Kearns-Sayre syndrome before passing away in 2017. Kenzi's courage and positive attitude inspired her family and many others, who rode again as Kenzi's Team (with remarkable fundraising results), in the McPherson ERI's 2025 Cycle for Sight event. Late 2024 marked the 8th round of Kenzi Valentyn Awards.

Grants of \$7,500 were given to five outstanding projects:

- ✿ **Celia Bisbach, PhD**, a postdoc in Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, mentored by **David Gamm, MD, PhD**
- ✿ **Madison Dillerud**, a graduate student in Neuroscience, mentored by **Timothy Gomez, PhD**
- ✿ **Wei Lin**, a graduate student in Electrical and Computer Engineering, mentored by **Andreas Velten, PhD**
- ✿ **Piper Rawding, PhD**, a postdoc in Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, mentored by **Sarah Gong, PhD**
- ✿ **Andrew Schultz**, a graduate student in Neuroscience, mentored by **Raunak Sinha, PhD**



Distinguished Paper Awards

A third round of **Distinguished Paper Awards** recognized trainee members who were the first author or co-first author on papers of note. Recipients this year were **Kushin Mukherjee, PhD** (graduate student, Psychology); **Ruosen "Alex" Xie, PhD** (postdoc, Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences); and **Isabel Iruani Villanueva** (graduate student, Life Sciences Communication).

Links to their papers are at vision.wisc.edu/funding_opportunities/distinguished-paper-awards/recipients.



Student and Trainee Awards

Dan & Ellie Albert Student Vision Research Awards, supporting a summer vision research project for an SMPH student through the Shapiro Summer Internship Program, were given to three students in 2025. Recipients were **Rishika Joshi** (**Laura Kopplin, MD, PhD**, mentor); **Emma Penfield** (**Freya Mowat, BVSc, PhD**, mentor); and **Chloe Stevens** (**Yao Liu, MD, MS**, mentor).

The McPherson ERI supported a **Hilldale Undergraduate Award** in 2025 to **Samay Inampudi**, who worked in the lab of **Chris Sorenson, PhD** (Pediatrics).

5 McPherson ERI trainees – **Anna Chinni**, **Neha Sriram**, **Zeinab Shirbaghaei, PhD**, **Ruosen "Alex" Xie, PhD**, and **Zoe Howard, PhD**—received support to attend the **StoryForm Science Course**, developed by Holly Kerby and Adam Steinberg, in Summer 2025.

Visiting Scholar Awards

Three \$3000 Visiting Scholar Awards were given in 2025:

- ✿ **Michael Gleicher, PhD** (Computer Sciences) hosted **Remco Chang, PhD** (Computer Science, Tufts University).
- ✿ **T. Michael Nork, MD, MS** (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences) hosted **Isabelle Audo, MD, PhD** (Genetics, Institut de la Vision).
- ✿ **Miranda Scalabrino, PhD** (Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, MCW) and **Raunak Sinha, PhD** (Neuroscience) hosted **Greg Field, PhD** (Ophthalmology, UCLA).

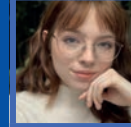
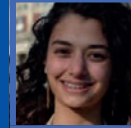
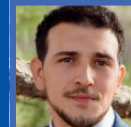


Walsh Research Travel Awards

Walsh Research Travel Awards, given each semester and supported by the David G. Walsh Research Fellowship Endowment, allow trainee researchers to present their findings and connect with other researchers at conferences—an essential aspect of career development.

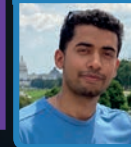
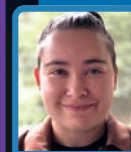
2025 recipients were:

- ✿ **Celia Bisbach, PhD**, a postdoctoral researcher at the Waisman Center (**David Gamm**, mentor)
- ✿ **Jacob Khoussine, PhD**, an MD student in Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences (**Kim Stepien** and **Jeremy Rogers**, mentors)
- ✿ **Miral Abdalaziz**, a graduate student in Neuroscience (**Ari Rosenberg**, mentor)
- ✿ **Madison Dillerud**, a graduate student in Neuroscience (**Tim Gomez**, mentor)
- ✿ **Yuheng Wu**, a graduate student in Computer Sciences, CDIS (**Yuhang Zhao**, mentor)



David G. Walsh Graduate Student Support Initiative (GSSI) Award

David G. Walsh Graduate Student Support Initiative awards were given to two grad students in 2025. **Karen Schloss, PhD**, was funded to support the work of graduate student **Anna Chinni**, on *Color Semantics for Object Detection*. **Xin Huang, PhD**, was funded to support graduate student **Bikalpa Ghimire**, who is working on the *Mechanistic Investigation of Motion Segmentation and Integration*. These \$12,000 tuition support grants are funded by the David G. Walsh Research Fellowship Endowment Fund.





JANUARY

Genetic Wiring

Developing gene editing therapies for vision loss is a key goal of MERI researchers. In the 2019 calendar, the replacement of a faulty section of DNA was envisioned as swapping out the faulty wiring for a new piece...in effect, what actually occurs in gene editing.

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NEW YEAR'S DAY

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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY

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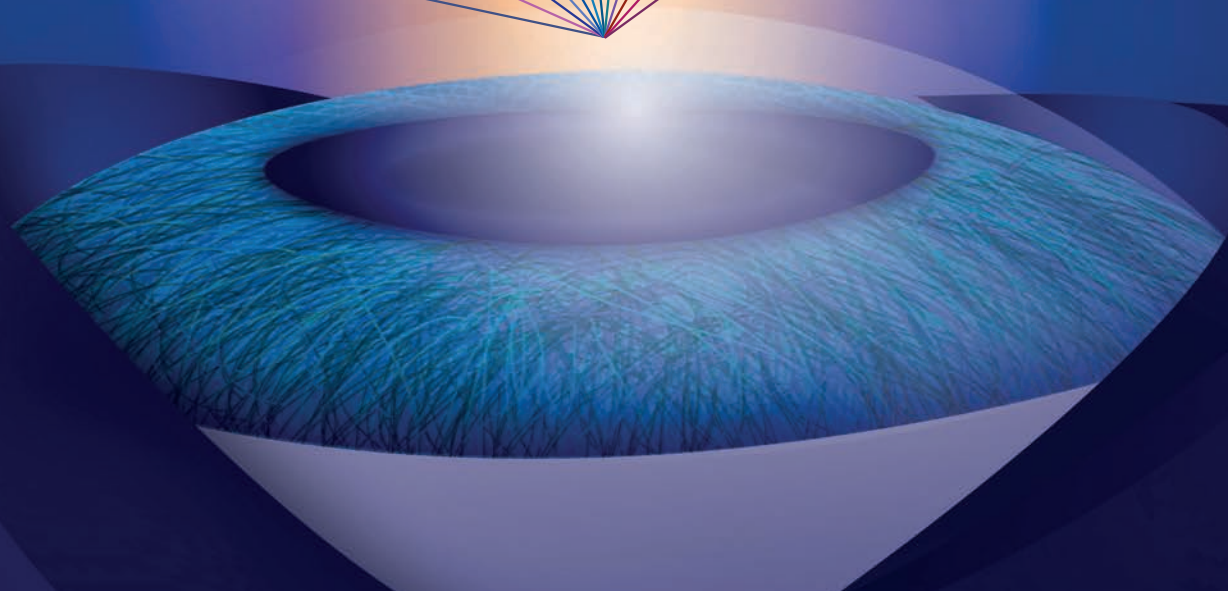
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FEB

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VISION SIGHT SIGHTEDNESS EYESIGHT SEEING EYE OCULUS LAMP PEEPER ORB WINKER OPTIC CONCEIVE ENVISAGE
ENVISION FANCY FEATURE IMAGE IMAGINE REALIZE VISUALIZE VISIONAL SEEABLE VISIBLE OPTICAL VISUAL OCULAR
VIEWABLE VISIBILITY VISUALITY VIEW SEE BEHOLD DISCERN DISTINGUISH ESPY MARK MIND NOTE NOTICE OBSERVE
VISIONARY SEER DREAMER IDEALIST UTOPIAN FORESEE PREVISION PROPHECY BLIND SIGHTLESS VISIONLESS
DARK DIM-STARDED I PERCEPTIVE UNSEEING UNSEEABLE INVISIBLE BLOODSPOT BLINDSIGHT SHADOW IN CLOUD OCCULTUDE
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FIX EYES ON HOLD IN VIEW TAKE NOTICE OF TURN ONE'S EYES TO TAKE A GANDER LAY EYES ON LOOK WATCH GAZE GLARE
PEEP PEEK STARE PEEK GLANCE GLIMPSE SPOT OGLE GAWK GOGGLE VISUAL MEMORY VISUAL ATTENTION
VISUAL AWARENESS VISUAL IMAGERY VISUAL DYNAMICS AMBIENT OPTIC ARRAY OPTIC FLOW VISUAL PATIANT'S CORNEA
MOEUS HUMOR PUPIL IRIS LENS CILIARY MUSCLES VITREOUS HUMOR RETINA PHOTORECEPTORS OPTIC NERVE
OPTIC CHIASM BINOCULAR VISION STEREOSCOPIC VISION COLOR VISION COLOR BLINDNESS DEPTH PERCEPTION COMPUTER VISION



FEBRUARY

Vision Expanding

Vision-related terms are emitted by the eye across the whole range of vision, in this 2015 illustration intended to showcase the range of MERI member labs.

JAN

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GROUNDHOG DAY

VALENTINE'S DAY

MARDI GRAS

RAMADAN BEGINS

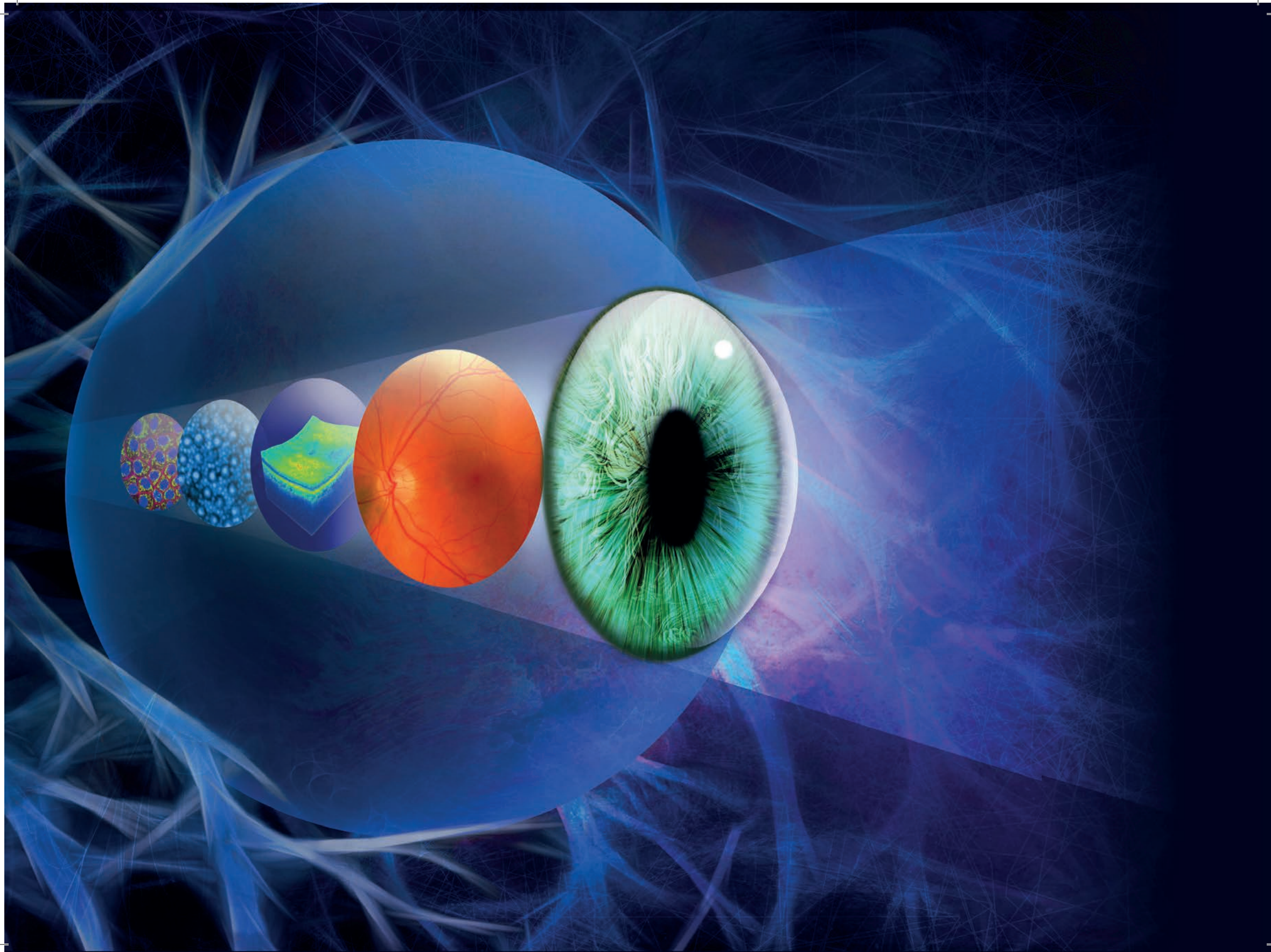
PRESIDENTS' DAY

CHINESE NEW YEAR

ASH WEDNESDAY

MAR

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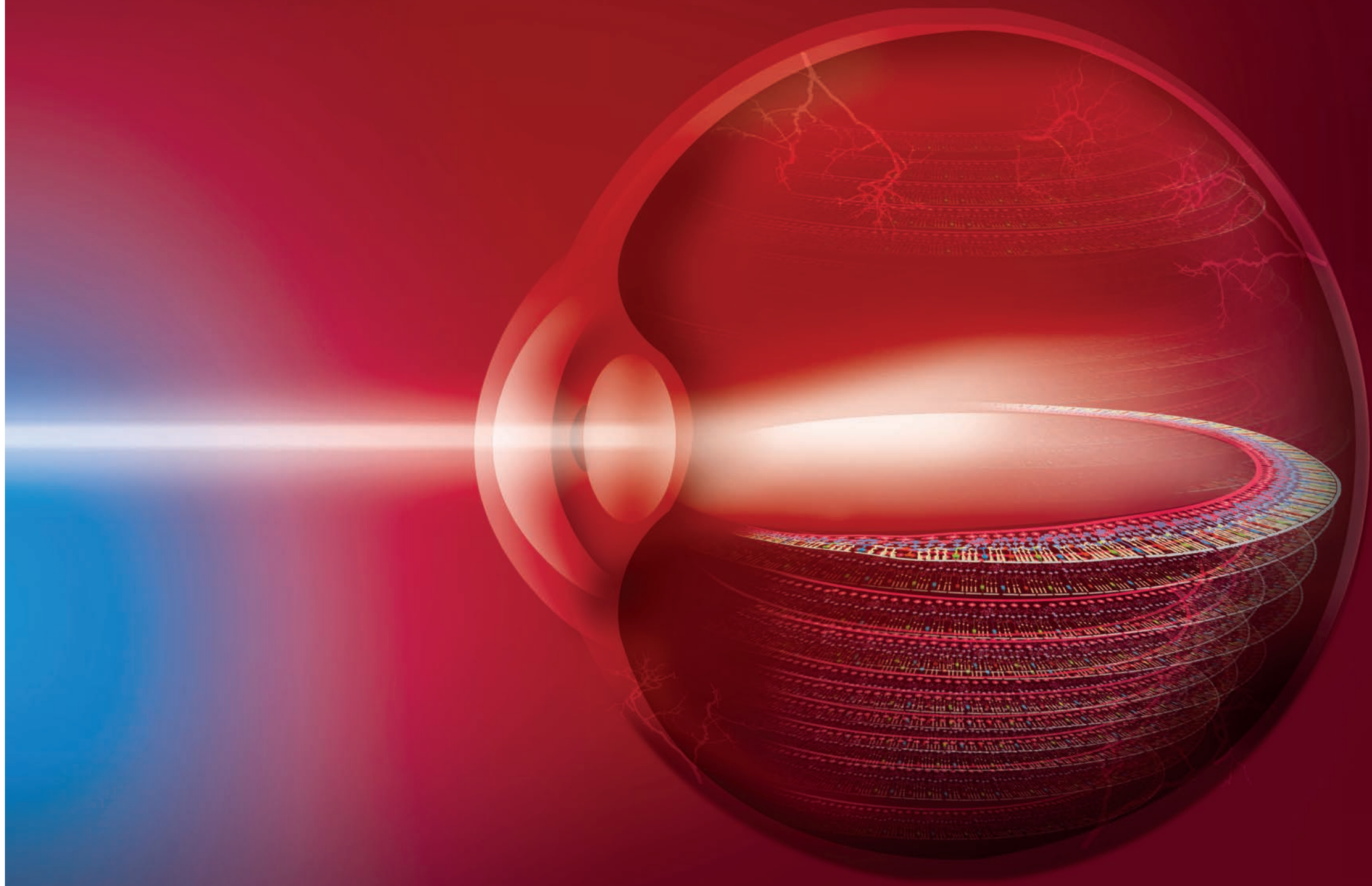


MARCH

Imaging Across Scales

MERI's range of imaging projects is featured in the 2020 calendar, represented by the image above, which depicts glimpses into the eye at various levels of magnification.

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DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME BEGINS																															
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APRIL

Realm of the Retina

The layers of the retina are visible in this 2017 illustration, which imagines the eye as both a light-absorbing and a light-emitting organ.

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APRIL FOOLS' DAY

PASSOVER BEGINS

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ORTHODOX EASTER

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EARTH DAY

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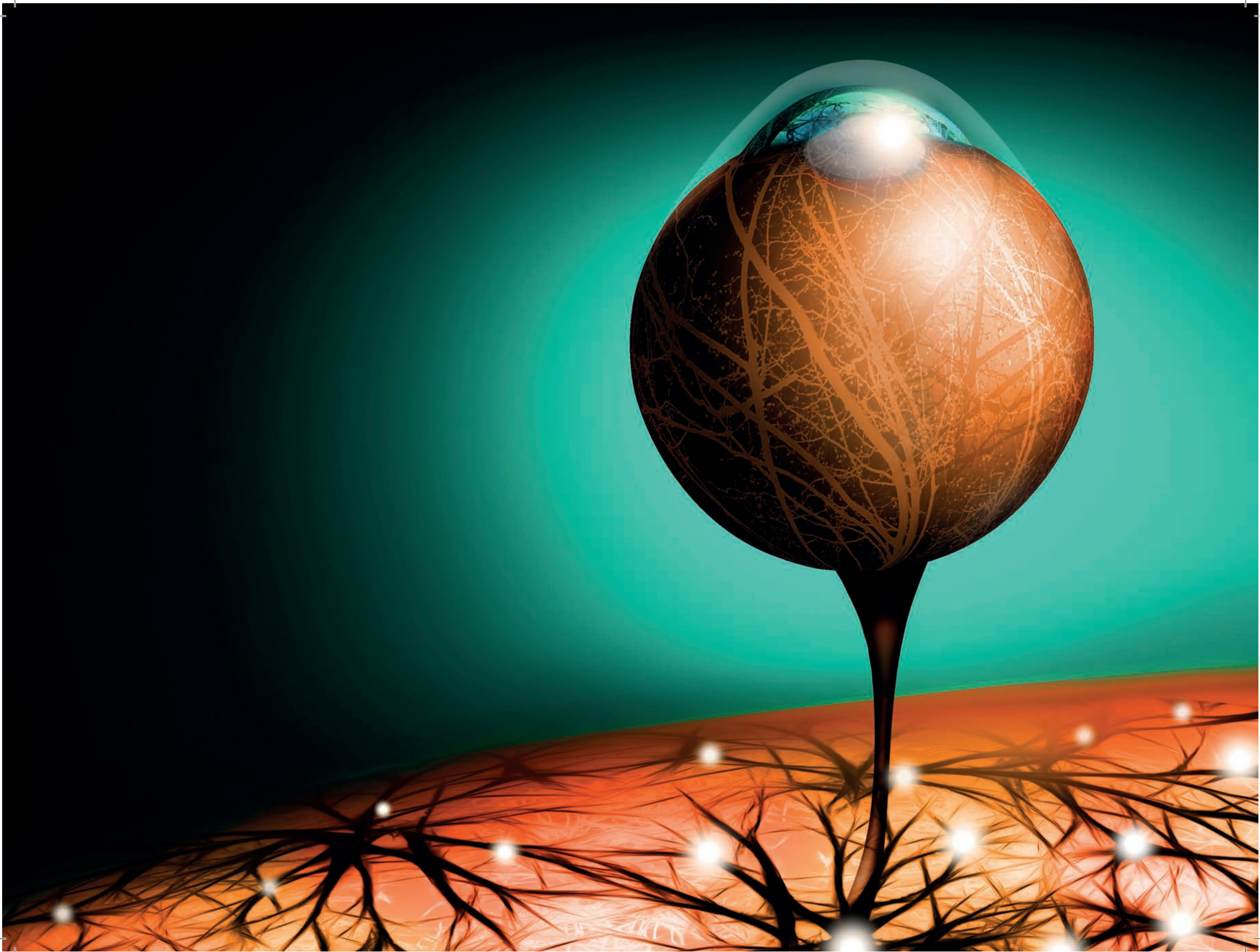


MAY

The Macular Puzzle

Age-related macular degeneration causes the central retina, known as the macula, to deteriorate. Scientists at the McPherson ERI are striving to treat this condition on many levels, including replacing this missing “piece” of the retina with stem cell technology.

APR	WED 1	THU 2	FRI 3	SAT 4	SUN 5	MON 6	TUE 7	WED 8	THU 9	FRI 10	SAT 11	SUN 12	MON 13	TUE 14	WED 15	THU 16	FRI 17	SAT 18	SUN 19	MON 20	TUE 21	WED 22	THU 23	FRI 24	SAT 25	SUN 26	MON 27	TUE 28	WED 29	THU 30	
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JUNE

The Seeing Mind

This somewhat abstract 2016 illustration situates the eye as an outcropping of the brain, which is anatomically correct, and also indicates the flashing connections between the two that are investigated in many MERI member labs.

MAY

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FATHER'S DAY

FIRST DAY OF SUMMER

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JUL

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JULY

The Receptor Field

The Gamm Lab's work on growing stem cell-derived photoreceptors is imagined as "farming photoreceptors" in this cover illustration from 2018. The first therapeutic derived from this technology is now in a clinical trial.

JUN

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INDEPENDENCE DAY
(OBSERVED)

INDEPENDENCE DAY

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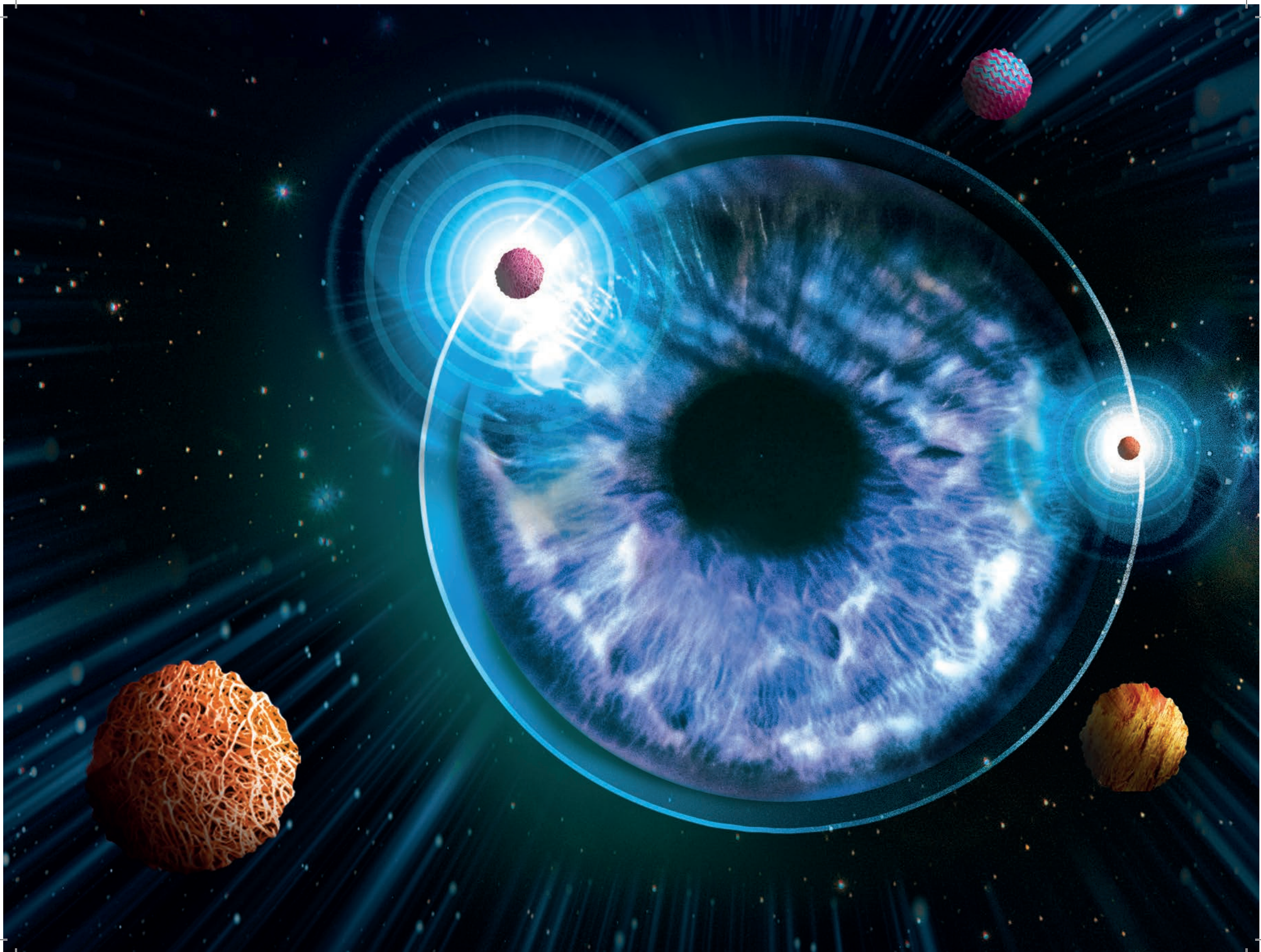
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AUG

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AUGUST

Protecting the Eye

MERI's 2023 calendar highlighted teams working on therapies to protect the eye from vision loss—here imagined as a shielded pupil protected from an array of asteroid-like projectiles.

JUL

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THURSDAY

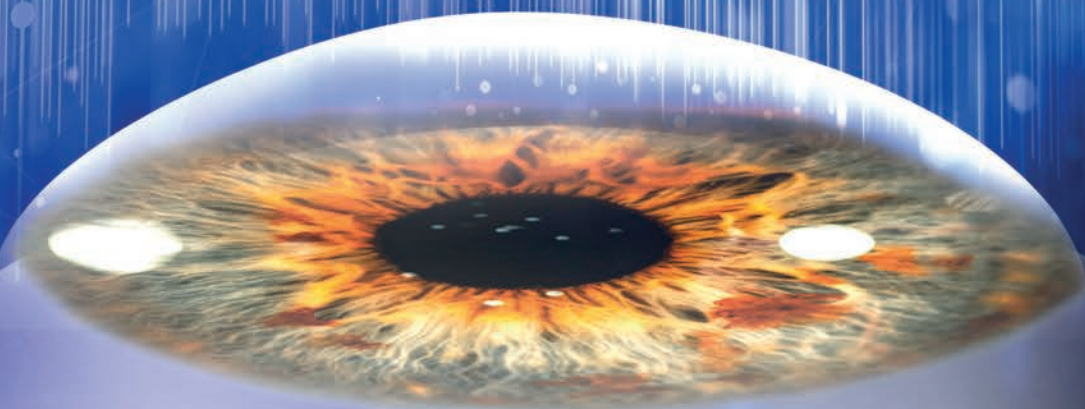
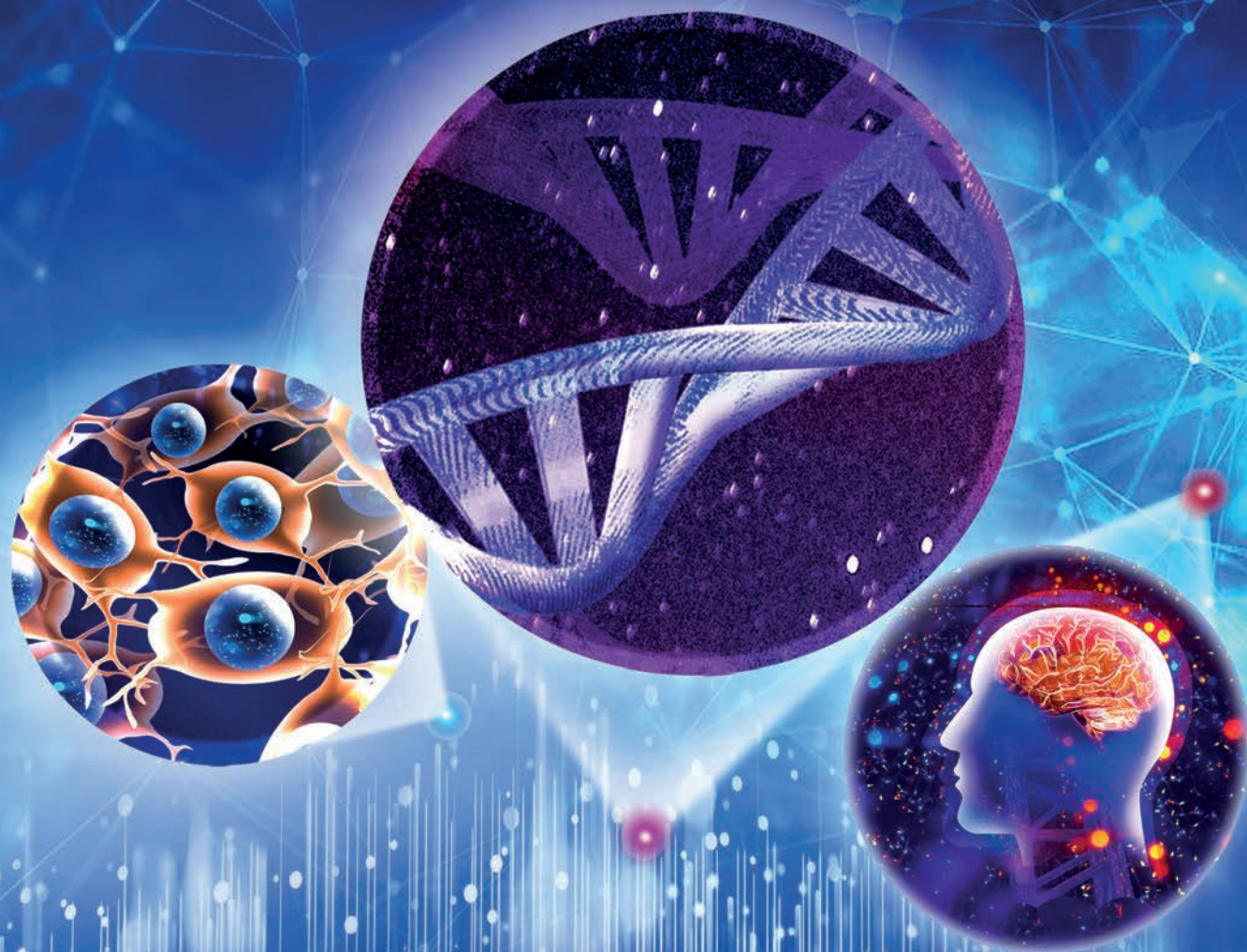
FRIDAY

SATURDAY

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SEP

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SEPTEMBER

Big Data on the Rise

The 2022 image above depicts data collected from the eye for different vision research purposes being uploaded to a network cloud.

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LABOR DAY

ROSH HASHANAH BEGINS

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FIRST DAY OF FALL

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OCTOBER

Mending Sight

MERI member scientists patch a hole in the eye, in a representation of the end goal of much member research—clinical applications that will restore or preserve sight.

SEP

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WORLD SIGHT DAY

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COLUMBUS DAY

INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S DAY

WHITE CANE SAFETY DAY

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HALLOWEEN

NOV

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NOVEMBER

The Eyes of a Child

Steps along the life path are depicted in the cover illustration for MERI's 2025 calendar, which highlighted research on pediatric blinding diseases.

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DAYLIGHT SAVING
TIME ENDS

ELECTION DAY

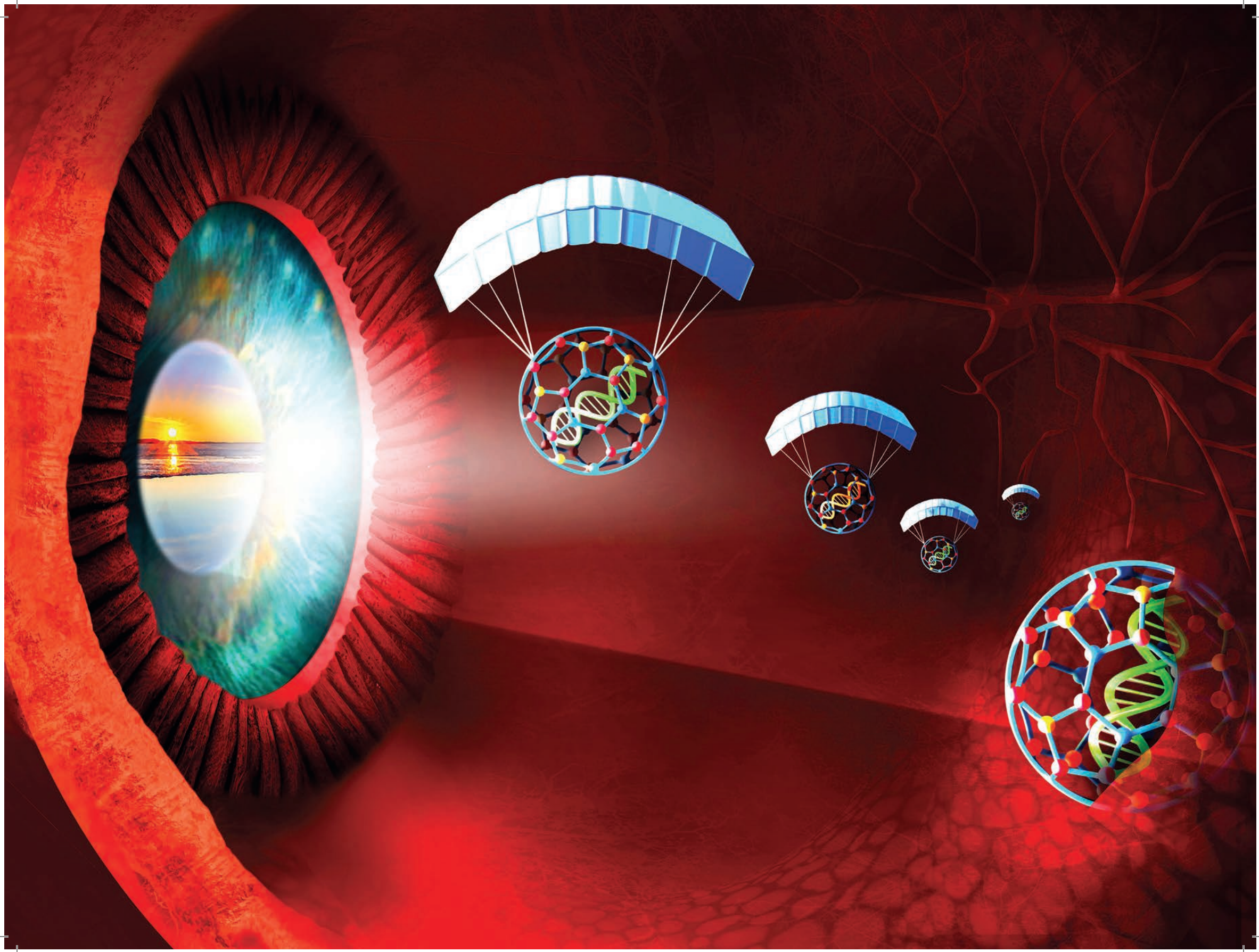
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VETERANS DAY

THANKSGIVING DAY

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DECEMBER

Special Delivery

The 2021 cover image depicts healthy genes being strategically delivered to the retina by “smart” nanocages after injection into the human eye.

NOV

SUN 1 MON 2 TUE 3 WED 4 THU 5 FRI 6 SAT 7 SUN 8 MON 9 TUE 10 WED 11 THU 12 FRI 13 SAT 14 SUN 15 MON 16 TUE 17 WED 18 THU 19 FRI 20 SAT 21 SUN 22 MON 23 TUE 24 WED 25 THU 26 FRI 27 SAT 28 SUN 29 MON 30

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HANUKKAH BEGINS

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FIRST DAY OF WINTER

CHRISTMAS EVE

CHRISTMAS DAY

KWANZAA BEGINS

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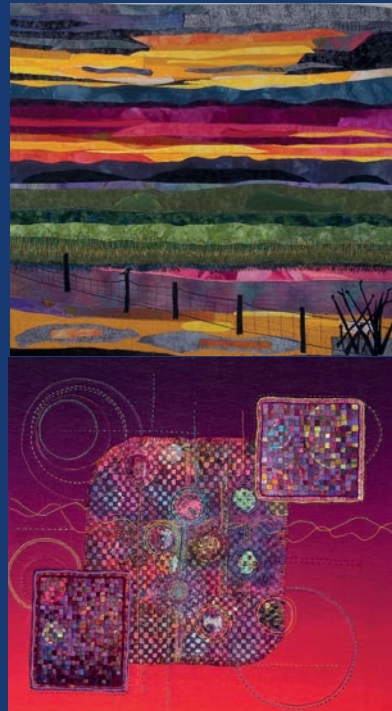
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NEW YEAR'S EVE

JAN

FRI 1 SAT 2 SUN 3 MON 4 TUE 5 WED 6 THU 7 FRI 8 SAT 9 SUN 10 MON 11 TUE 12 WED 13 THU 14 FRI 15 SAT 16 SUN 17 MON 18 TUE 19 WED 20 THU 21 FRI 22 SAT 23 SUN 24 MON 25 TUE 26 WED 27 THU 28 FRI 29 SAT 30 SUN 31

The Mandelbaum & Albert Family Vision Gallery



Constructs of Color Hard and Soft

In Spring 2025, Constructs of Color Hard and Soft explored the multifaceted impacts of color, in works of translucent glass and stitched fabric. Stained glass works by artist Randy Glysch were featured alongside fiber, needlework, and mixed media stitchworks by twenty-two Memory Cloth Circle artists.



Visions of Science

Art from Eye Research, which ran through the summer of 2025, showcased a retrospective of research-inspired images from 15 years of McPherson ERI calendars, designed by Swedish artist and graphic designer Malin Nordlund.

INSTALLATIONS IN 2025



Cool Science Images 2025

Cool Science Images 2025 is showing in the gallery in Fall 2025 (through January 23rd, 2026) and features the winners of UW-Madison's annual contest for the year's best science-related images.

McPherson ERI Lectures, 2025



13th Annual Alice McPherson Lecture, May 2025

Shannon Boye, PhD (University of Florida) presented the annual lecture honoring the McPherson ERI's co-founder, Dr. Alice McPherson. Dr. Boye spoke on *Optimizing Viral Gene Delivery for the Treatment of X-Linked Retinoschisis*, as part of the McPherson ERI's 20th anniversary celebrations in May.



3rd Annual Sandra Lemke Trout Lecture, September 2025

Emily Chew, MD (National Eye Institute) gave the 3rd Annual Sandra Lemke Trout Lecture, sponsored by the Trout AMD Project. Dr. Chew spoke on *Age-related Macular Degeneration: An Update of AREDS and AREDS2*.



17th Annual Vision Science Lecture, October 2025

Allison Sekuler, PhD (University of Toronto) delivered the McPherson ERI's 17th Annual Vision Science Lecture as part of MERI's Vision Science Symposium, which also included the Institute's annual poster session. Dr. Sekuler's talk was titled *Vision and the Brain: Towards Predictive Neuroscience for Precision Aging*.



3rd Annual Daniel M. Albert Lecture, November 2025

The Daniel M. Albert Lecture, endowed by Dr. Alice McPherson in honor of the distinguished career of the McPherson ERI's Founding Director, took place in Madison on November 6th. The talk by **M. Roy Wilson, MD** (President Emeritus, Wayne State University) was titled *Why Do Some People Go Blind from Glaucoma and Others Do Not? Rethinking the Role of Race*.

Cycle for Sight 2025 Tops \$75,000!

Cycle for Sight inched past the \$75,000 mark in 2025—once again, an all-time high! We're grateful to all of our participants and the donors who supported them.

Our Princeton Club spinning session on March 15th was followed by various team events outdoors through April. Kenzi's Team once again led the tally with a remarkable effort that raised almost \$40,000 of the total. As always though, other leading teams did very well. Our major sponsors—Opsis Therapeutics, the Chippewa Valley Eye Clinic, and the Princeton Club—continue to be a great help to the event.

Outdoor exercise through Cycle for Sight has become a regular annual outing for some of our teams, including medical students from UW's School of Medicine and Public Health, the Isthmus Eye Care team, and multiple McPherson ERI labs. We encourage everyone to join in and exercise through the spring each year...and to send us pictures!

Cycle for Sight supports vision research grants each year, including the highly-sought-after Kenzi Valentyn Vision Research Awards. Recipients of these grants are noted on a previous page. To date, 36 trainee scientists (grad students and postdocs) have received Kenzi Valentyn Awards, a wonderful boost to their work and to vision research.

**Cycle for Sight
2026 Kicks Off at
the Princeton Club
on March 14th,
2026!**



WITH THANKS AND APPRECIATION

TO THE FOLLOWING DONORS TO THE McPHERSON EYE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

July 2024 to October 2025:

- | | | | | | |
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Supporting the McPherson ERI

Research by McPherson ERI scientists will lead to new therapies for blinding diseases and a greater understanding of all aspects of vision in the coming years. Your help is important to this progress.

Please consider donating to one of our research funds:

McPherson Eye Research Institute Fund, Fund #112652569 (support for all areas of vision research)

McPherson ERI Macular Degeneration Fund, Fund #132580419 (direct AMD support)

Cycle for Sight Fund, Fund #112907277 (pilot research awards & grants)

David G. Walsh Research Fellowship Fund, Fund #132657115 (trainee researcher support)

To discuss what you can do to help our research, please contact Michael Chaim, chaim@wisc.edu, 608-320-9347.

**Thank
you for
your help!**

MISSION STATEMENT

THE MCPHERSON EYE RESEARCH INSTITUTE IS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY COMMUNITY OF SCHOLARS WORKING TO GAIN CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE SCIENCE AND ART OF VISION AND APPLY IT TO THE PREVENTION OF BLINDNESS.

For more information on how to partner with the McPherson Eye Research Institute in support of research, education, and treatment advances in the visual sciences, please contact us.

Front cover design: *Looking Forward*

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