

# ELIZABETH FOUT-CARAZA: THE EYES OF THE COMMUNITY

“A MAN CONFESSED TO ME, ‘I HAD NEVER SEEN MY WIFE. I WAS BLIND FOR 15 YEARS WHEN I GOT MARRIED, BUT NOW I CAN SEE.’ IT IS INCREDIBLE TO BE ABLE TO HELP PEOPLE,” SAID FOUT-CARAZA.

BY EDUARDO HAPKE/MIAMI

It's a clear morning in the city of Miami. The sun is bright, and the temperature is comfortable. Minutes from the Atlantic Ocean and the tourists on South Beach, you can find the Florida Lions Eye Bank, located in the number one ophthalmology hospital in the country, the famous Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, within the medical complex of the University of Miami.

From early morning, the Eye Bank team headed by its Executive Director, Elizabeth Fout-Caraza, begins another day, carrying out their noble mission to restore the beauty of the sight to the community of South Florida and to others throughout the world.

This task is repeated daily, month after month and year after year, always with intense passion, integrity, humanity and professionalism. The goal is clear: restoring vision to those who are without sight. The team of the Eye Bank accomplishes this by recovering eyes, corneas and other ophthalmic tissue from donors who have

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authorized it through their registration as organ and tissue donors with the state of Florida, or by consent from their families. To achieve this, they work with hospitals, medical examiners and funeral directors, all in pursuit of the ophthalmic tissue that can save or restore the sight of a person in need.

This mission requires dealing sensitively with the emotions of the eye donor families who, in their moment of grief, are facilitating the donation of their loved ones eyes to help another human being to be able to see a sunset, or a night full of stars once again, and sometimes for the first time. And while these conversations are not always easy, they are necessary to complete the noble mission of this organization.

#### **THE EYE BANK IS BORN**

The Florida Lions Eye Bank (FLEB) is a non-profit organization, which began more than 50 years ago, in 1964 in collaboration with the first hospital in Miami devoted to sight, the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute. Knowing that the cornea transplant would be an important need for the community, the founders of the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute called for help from the Lions of Florida. The Lions were the ones who donated the funds to start the organization, and they are the ones who created the Florida Lions Eye Bank, independent, but integrated with the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute.

The cornea is the first lens that is found in the front of the eye, above the iris. It is the tissue upon which contact lenses are placed.

The clarity of the cornea allows light and images to pass through toward the inside of the eye through the pupil and to the retina. When the cornea loses its transparency and becomes opaque, the only hope is often to replace it via a cornea transplant.

#### **DONATING IS KEY**

In the state of Florida anyone can register to be an organ, eye and tissue donor. This can be done through the Department of Motor Vehicles process, or at the website [www.donateliflorida.org](http://www.donateliflorida.org). This website allows Floridians to indicate which organs or tissues they want to donate. When a person dies a call is made to a family member to either obtain authorization for the donation, or to inform them that their family member is already registered. The biggest obstacle that exists in these cases, however, is time. The recovery of eye tissue from a donor must be completed within the first 12 to 18 hours after death. In addition, the tissue must be transplanted into the recipient within seven days in the United States. Outside of the country, the transplant can be done up to 14 days after receipt of the tissue.

"The donation of tissue is very sensitive work because relatives of the deceased person must be involved in the process. This is very often a difficult time for the grieving family. But usually families who are affected by their loss, are also looking for hope. People often call us to thank us for the opportunity to donate their loved one's eyes. "It is comforting for them to know that

a part of their family is still living in another person," said Elizabeth Fout-Caraza.

Since the organization is in the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, half of the tissues are utilized in this hospital, but the rest are distributed among physicians in Florida. When excess tissue is available, however, tissue is sent to Central America and Latin America, as well. And not only are tissues sent to other countries, but the organization also provides aid to other countries that are trying to form their own eye banks.

#### **GREAT EXPERIENCE**

Since 1998, Elizabeth Fout-Caraza has been working with the organization and today she is its Executive Director. After receiving an undergraduate degree in Biology from the University of Florida she began working as a technician in the morgue doing surgeries to recover corneas. But that wasn't enough. Interested in the social aspect of the profession and wanting to improve the organization to help more people, she returned to the University and obtained a master degree in hospital administration.

"The Florida Lions Eye Bank is an incredible organization. The people that we are helping need us so desperately. Because the Eye Bank is located in the Bascom Palmer, we often communicate directly with patients. They visit us and tell us 'You changed my life, I was blind, I could not read, I couldn't do anything.' There was a man who confessed to me, 'I had never seen my wife. I was blind for 15 years when I got



In 2014, more than 700 transplants were performed.

married and had never seen her. But now I can see'. It is something incredible to be able to help people," said Fout-Caraza.

#### **FLORIDA LIONS EYE BANK (FLEB)**

Fout-Caraza manages 20 people in the organization. One of her missions is to go directly to the South Florida community to build awareness about the organization and the need for eye donation. But not only that, Elizabeth wants to educate the community. She wants to teach them how to care for their sight and how to recognize sight issues. She wants to talk to young people and adults about how to achieve a healthy lifestyle that will help them protect their precious sight.

The statistics of the organization are more than impressive. In the year 2014 FLEB received tissue from 855 eyes and cornea donors (82,252 in total since the

beginning of FLEB). In that same year they provided tissue for 1,235 transplants or other ocular surgeries. Additionally, the organizations GRATIS international program donated 365 corneas in 2014. In total, 1,600 patients were helped.

How are the organization's funds managed and where do they come from? "In the first place, funds come from the reimbursement that we receive for the tissues. Tissues that are needed for transplant are paid for by the recipient's health insurance. But, there are many people here in Miami who do not have insurance, or the opportunity to pay. In that case we donate the tissue. To pay for that, we have patients that are very grateful and donate money so we may continue with our mission. The Lions Clubs also donate money, and there are other foundations that also support us. We are always looking

to help more people," said Fout-Caraza .

The organization needs partners to provide funds to the Eye Bank so it may continue its growth, and that is one of the challenges for the directors in 2015. To support this growth the brand has been re-strengthened in its entirety, with a new logo and the creation of a new website ([www.fleb.org](http://www.fleb.org)) - which is available in Spanish and English - and other marketing and public relations initiatives that have also been launched through social media. The annual report of the organization is also printed in Spanish to serve the Latino community.

"We have to communicate with our Latino community. For more than 50 years we have done everything in English, and now we are starting to change that. We cannot communicate with the Spanish community if we do not speak the same language," explained Fout-Caraza.

#### **TRANSPLANTS AND THE ECONOMY**

Every year in the United States alone, more than 45,000 people need a cornea transplant. The cornea is the most commonly transplanted tissue in the country, more than the heart, kidney, and other organs. In 2014 the Florida Lions Eye Bank provided tissue for more than 700 transplants in Florida, which contributed \$64 million to the economy of the state. The Florida Lions Eye Bank is one of the most important eye banks in the United States, and one of the oldest in the country, which gives the eye bank enormous credibility.

"We are helping the economy of Florida because the people who are blind cannot work. But we are not only helping them, but also their families and the community because many of them cannot do things by themselves," explained Fout-Caraza.

There is always a need for more organ donations. Due to cultural issues, the Hispanic community is stigmatized with the donation of organs and tissues after death. More than 18% of Americans who expect an organ transplant are Hispanic. However, only 12% of the organ donors are Hispanic. This is something Elizabeth Fout-Caraza hopes to change right here in this community.