

International Committee

Prepared Speech

“Will you not constitute yourselves knights of the blind in this crusade against darkness?”

With those 14 words, Helen Keller changed forever the destiny of Lions Clubs International. As Lions, we know that the answer was a resounding, “yes!” Although that “yes” was spoken 80 years ago, it resounds through the world today. I can hear it in this room. I can hear it from all of you.

But since that time, the world has changed in ways that Helen Keller and the Lions at the 1925 international convention could not possibly have imagined.

So, what does it mean to be knights of the blind in the 21st century?

For most of the 20th century, being a knight of the blind meant ensuring that blind children received an education and that blind adults were treated with compassion and respect. It meant establishing eye banks and hospitals that could restore the sight of a fortunate few.

Is that what it takes to be knights of the blind in the 21st century?

Yes... but it is not enough. The 21st century demands more. In fact, many people believe that the 21st century is *too* demanding. It has little tolerance for the ineffective, the slow or the timid. We once were insulated by oceans, mountains and rivers, but today, global concerns reach into our daily lives, our jobs and even our homes.

So how will we Lions respond in this demanding century?

We will respond with effectiveness, with urgency and on a worldwide scale that would astound Helen Keller and the Lions of her day.

A tall order, yes... but fortunately Lions already know how to respond boldly on such a scale. In the last decade of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st, Lions did more to prevent blindness and restore sight than in the previous 65 years.

How is that possible?

SightFirst made it possible.

Consider these facts...

- Through SightFirst, Lions have saved or restored sight for 24 million people. That is more people than live in the U.S. state of Texas... more than the combined populations of New York and Tokyo.
- Lions have provided 65 million yearly treatments for River Blindness. Averaged over 15 years, that would be enough to prevent this painful parasitic infection from taking the sight of 4.3 million people... about twice the number of people who live in Rome... or Toronto.

- Lions have provided eye-care education for 68,000 health workers who will safeguard sight in their communities for years to come. If we brought them all together for a graduation ceremony, they would nearly fill the 2004 Olympic Stadium in Athens.

There is more, much more.

Lions have built hospitals, equipped clinics and organized educational programs.

As a result of this extraordinary service, we Lions have become recognized experts and leaders in the international effort to eliminate avoidable blindness. Our expertise has become indispensable. Our commitment is irreplaceable. Our greatest asset – 1.4 million Lions around the world willing to work to protect sight in their communities, cannot be matched by any other organization.

Through SightFirst, Lions have done nothing less than change the world. Not just the small corner of the world in our home communities – the entire world. By “thinking globally and acting locally,” Lions have made ourselves indispensable in the international effort to combat blindness. In fact, national governments and international organizations look to us as leaders more than ever before.

It is a remarkable record of achievement – but it is an achievement of the 20th century.

The 21st century requires us to do even more. Threats to sight that were not on the horizon in 1990 have emerged and are growing steadily. The rapidly aging world population means that age-related blindness is increasing. Cataract remains the most common cause of avoidable blindness and an even more challenging opponent than it was 15 years ago.

Diabetes is epidemic, putting millions of people at risk of losing their sight to diabetic retinopathy. Frighteningly, millions may not even know that they are at risk. The same is true of glaucoma – many millions do not know that they are threatened by this “stealth” disease.

The increasing world population has made childhood blindness a growing problem. Tragically, one child goes blind every minute. Even more tragically, 80 percent of childhood blindness is preventable – sometimes preventable by something as simple as an eye exam and an appropriate pair of eyeglasses. Without them – or without other needed treatments – these children will not experience the world in the way every growing child should. Learning may be difficult or impossible and things that we take for granted – like the ability to read and write – could be closed to them forever.

To fulfill our commitment as knights of the blind in the 21st century, we must take on these challenges and bring our service to new heights.

The Lions of the last century showed us how. From 1991 to 1994 they lifted everyone’s expectations of what Lions could do by raising US\$143 million to fund the SightFirst Program. That figure rose to US\$200 million through investments and additional contributions. After 724 grants totaling US\$175 million, only US\$25 million remains.

Our means to new heights of service will be Campaign SightFirst II, which will raise US\$150 million to continue and expand the vital work of SightFirst. An additional US\$50 million, set as a “challenge goal,” will enable Lions to extend our leadership to the areas of research, rehabilitation and education for the blind, and service to the poor and vulnerable in developed nations.

Like Campaign SightFirst in the early 1990s and like all LCIF programs, Campaign SightFirst II is a practical way for Lions to help Lions help others. It reaches into the heart of Lionism which calls us to “create and foster a spirit of understanding among the peoples of the world,” and to “unite in the bonds of friendship, good fellowship and understanding.”

The globalism of the 21st century works both ways. Not only is it possible for the concerns of the world to intrude on our lives, it is now possible to reach out and address those concerns with a power unimaginable to previous generations of knights of the blind. Campaign SightFirst II is a worldwide effort of all Lions. The generous gift of a Lion in Japan may make it possible to build an eye clinic in India. The gift of a Lion in the United States may make it possible to work toward the elimination of river blindness in Latin America. And the gift of a Lion in Brazil may make it possible to bring the LEHP program to a small town in the United Kingdom.

If we truly claim “We Serve” as our motto, I believe that effective service on a worldwide scale is the ultimate expression of that ideal.

Campaign SightFirst II was officially launched at the 2005 International Convention in Hong Kong. Model Clubs will be leading the way as they begin to raise funds in this first year of the campaign. Intensive fund raising at the local level will really begin in Lion years 2006-2007 and 2007-2008. Please keep this in mind as you plan activities for this time and be sure that clubs and districts are able to make CSFII their top fund raising priority in at least one of those years. We expect to celebrate our success at the 2008 International Convention in Bangkok.

You can take part in this great opportunity for service even before intensive fund raising begins in your area. You can help prepare for a successful campaign by...

- Spreading the word about the extraordinary things that Lions have accomplished through SightFirst,
- Use publications and videos available from LCIF and the CSFII office, or by visiting www.lcif.org,
- Learn more about Campaign SightFirst II on the Web-site: www.Lions-CSFII.org,
- Make CSFII part of your club fund raising *right now*. You might wish to schedule one extra fund-raising event this year and designate the proceeds for Campaign SightFirst II. Also, beginning now and for the next three years, new Melvin Jones Fellowships may be dedicated to Campaign SightFirst II and those gifts will count toward your club and district total at the conclusion of the campaign.

So perhaps the 21st century is not as harsh as some people believe. It makes its demands... but it also gives us the means and opportunity to meet them. And meet them, we will – as Lions united in worldwide service.

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