

SightLife

Blind. The word people use as they picture wandering in the dark. The sensation people describe after wandering around their house with their eyes closed. But for some, it is much more than that. For some, it is more than empty words, phrases and pictures, depicting dark blackness with small imaginary lights dancing around the human field of vision. For some, it is Cornea Blindness, a disease that thickens the outermost layer of the eye to the point in which life can't pass through. Cornea blindness is a curable disease and it is extremely rare in the U.S. where if you do have it, a hospital is never more than an hour away. But in developing countries, hospitals are hard to reach, and too expensive once you get there. Many organizations are planning on changing that, but one stands out. SightLife, a Whatcom county nonprofit organization, is planning to rid the world of Cornea blindness, one eye bank at a time.

“Our mission at SightLife is to end cornea blindness,” said an unknown source at SightLife. First started by the Lions Club of Washington and Northern Idaho, SightLife is now one of the largest eye banks in the world, “Working with surgeons in over 30 countries, SightLife restores sight to 20 men, woman, and children every day.” That’s 620 people per month, 7,220 people per year, or 72,200 people a decade! Although this may seem like a lot, over 10 million people suffer from cornea blindness, and more are added onto the list every day. But with SightLife's goal of “creating 900 eye banks around the world,” it almost seems possible to treat the 10 million people infected with cornea blindness. Almost.

“Most people have never heard of an ‘eye bank’, but it is really quite simple: eye banks receive corneas from organ donors, then evaluate and prepare the corneas to be implanted.” (SightLife). In the years of 2008 and 2009 SightLife provided over 7,260 corneas for donation, and in developing countries, “Half the people born blind die before they turn two.” Just imagine, \$120, or an eye from a newly deceased person, could save a child’s life. Trying to live with the fact, that the money you spent at a restaurant, a hotel, or a new cell phone could have saved a child’s life would be impossible. You might consider yourself narcissistic, selfish or self centered for the rest of your life. Could you live with that?

When a cornea is diseased, it becomes cloudy, and no light can pass through, making a person blind. The only way that a cornea can be repaired is through a “cornea transplant.” This is done, literally, by taking the old cornea out and replacing it with the new one. Once transplanted, the new cornea is held in place by tiny structures that stay in place until the cornea is healed – this only costs 120 dollars. Restoring a person’s sight is a great honor, but receiving the sight brings a greater joy. Just ask Sukhadev of India who, when he lost his sight became so depressed that he shut himself in his room, with only old Indian sentimental songs to comfort him and help him through his depression, or Sunday Monday, (this is a real name) who lost his education with his sight. Because of SightLife, they are both back on the way to strong and fruitful lives.

Because I swim whenever possible, it would be easy for my eyes to be damaged by chlorine or simply lake water, and I can only imagine what it would be like to have my sight disappear. It would put a halt to everything I enjoy doing, including skiing, where it is critical not to run into people, mountain biking, where you could fling yourself

of a cliff, or running, so you don't put yourself in the way of cars. Losing my sight would make me inactive and take away some of my life's most enjoyable pleasures, and on one side of my family, almost every person has to wear glasses or contacts so it is quite possible. I, being lucky, have 20/16 vision, but that does not make me immune to accidents. I spend a lot of time in nature, and Mother Nature is not forced to follow safety regulations.

Ending cornea blindness may seem impossible, but SightLife, a nonprofit organization based in the Puget Sound area, more specifically in Whatcom County, is reaching out all over the world to fix the problem. And they are 20 people a day, 620 people a month, 7,220 people a year, and 72,200 people a decade. They, with many other eye banks around the world can topple the ultimate goal of eliminating cornea disease. Do you think they can do it? I definitely do.

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