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Bequest made by eye researcher Kinsey's widow

When Irene Kinsey Stare died at age 100 in March 2013, Oakland University already knew she was donating just over $1 million to its Eye Research Institute, which her first husband, renowned eye researcher V. Everett Kinsey, co-founded in 1968. But what OU didn't know was that Kinsey Stare changed her will two months before her death to increase the gift to nearly $3.7 million — making her the single-largest donor in the institute's 46-year history.

By Kirk Pinho

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The scope of the gift also opens the door to a more substantial investment in new eye research at OU.

The OU Institute, which conducts research on various ophthalmic diseases in its efforts to prevent blindness and vision loss, will invest that money and use 4.5 percent of the interest it generates — about $164,000 in the first year — to attract two new researchers. Both of those researchers will hold V. Everett Kinsey Endowed Professorships.

"(Kinsey Stare) just really wanted the institute to prosper, be strong in the future, and that's what we hope to do with this award," said Frank Giblin, professor of biomedical sciences at OU and the institute's director for the last decade.

In 2004, she pledged a $525,000 planned gift to establish the endowed professorship. She pledged another $500,000 two months before her death.

"We flew out to Boston for the funeral," said Angie Schmucker, executive director of planned and annual giving for OU. "And then we get a phone call in September 2013 that she had changed her will — and that there was a portion she didn't tell us about. She left the remainder of her estate to us, after she made some other charitable gifts to her interests and her husband's interests."

Giblin and James Lentini, senior vice president for academic affairs and provost, will ultimately decide how the money is spent. But Giblin said most likely the $82,000 per researcher will pay for things like research labs, equipment, and doctoral and post-doctoral assistants for them.

"Because of Dr. Kinsey's status, Oakland University was put on the map as far as eye research is concerned," Reddy said.

Seven years earlier, Kinsey was also one of those responsible for the creation of the National Foundation for Eye Research in Washington, D.C., when he was a faculty member at the Howe Laboratory of Ophthalmology at the Harvard Medical School. Kinsey was one of the original trustees for the foundation, and Reddy became a trustee in 1972 and president of the foundation in 1978.

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However, OU was kept in the dark about the rest of the gift, the money for which came from the Kinseys' OU and Wayne State University retirement savings, interest on which had been compounding for decades, said Giblin.

It wasn't until six months later that they learned about it.

High-impact gift

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The institute — which has received about $50 million in funding from organizations such as the Novi-based Vision Research ROPARD Foundation, the National Eye Institute and the National Institutes of Health — has five faculty members and focuses its research on various diseases and conditions. Those include macular degeneration, glaucoma, retinitis pigmentosa (a degenerative eye disease) and diabetic retinopathy (damage to retinal blood vessels).

Although treatments for some diseases like glaucoma, cataracts and diabetic retinopathy have been discovered — and much is known about them — their exact causes are still not fully understood, said Giblin.

"We know some things, but not everything about them," he said. "For example, we don't know the fine details of exactly how increased intraocular pressure is killing retinal ganglion cells" and causing glaucoma.

Because there are still plenty of ophthalmological unknowns, making much progress in preventing eye diseases is difficult, said Philip Hessburg, M.D., medical director of the Detroit Institute of Ophthalmology, a division of the Department of Ophthalmology at the Henry Ford Health System.

Hessburg, who studied under Kinsey at the Kresge Eye Institute, said that makes any new findings the institute can develop in research significant.

"They are interested primarily in learning the root causes of some of the most profound problems in ophthalmology," he said. "That is really, really important."

Pioneering research

Kinsey was one of the premier eye researchers in the country, institute co-founder Venkat Reddy, 92, said in a statement. This dates back to his work in the 1950s.

In 1956, Kinsey, a biochemist, was in esteemed company when he won the Lasker Foundation Clinical Medical Research Award for his research showing that incidence of blindness in premature babies increased if they received more oxygen.

That same year, Jonas Salk won the same award for developing the polio vaccine.

Kinsey's "was the first clinical trial ever conducted in vision and that showed definitively that babies treated with higher levels of oxygen developed retinopathy prematurely," Giblin said.

"Because of Dr. Kinsey's status, Oakland University was put on the map as far as eye research is concerned," Reddy said.
Kinsey died that same year at age 68 of a stroke.

Following her husband’s death, Kinsey Stare, who married Frederick Stare, founder of the Department of Nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health, in 1984 and relocated to Boston, continued donating to the institute. She also supported other causes such as the arts, given her background as an accomplished violinist.

An obituary for Kinsey Stare in the Boston Globe said she was “an enthusiastic supporter” of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the New England Conservatory of Music.

Her estate gift to Oakland, Giblin said, is all the more welcome because of how hard it can be to raise funding for researchers.

"It’s very difficult for basic scientists to receive donations," he said.

"You’ve heard the term ‘grateful patients’? If they receive excellent treatment, their first thought is to give a donation to the clinician, not the basic scientist that discovered the drug that treated the disease."

Kirk Pinho: (313) 446-0412, kpinho@crain.com, Twitter: @kirkpinhoCD