Ten years has proven fruitful for the Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

In that time, more than 5,000 patients have received care at the only low vision house situated on an academic medical center campus.

Also, the Weigel Williamson Center has grown from one doctor and one occupational therapist at one location to multiple eye care providers and occupational therapists serving 600 patients a year in Omaha and at two satellite clinics in Nebraska and one in Iowa.

“It blows the mind,” said John Shepherd, M.D., director of the Weigel Williamson Center. “Ten years ago I was trying to develop something similar in Arizona but the true oasis was in Nebraska.”

Dr. Shepherd attributes the Weigel Williamson Center’s success to the support of former UNMC Chancellor, Harold M. Maurer, M.D., the University of Nebraska Foundation and the practitioners, staff and volunteers who are committed to providing the highest quality of care to the patients they serve.

Dr. Maurer, he said, supported the vision of UNMC staff members Gerald Christensen, M.D., Kathy VanDollen, R.N., and Pat Jones, R.N., to create a place where patients who had run out of surgical and other medical options could still maintain the highest quality of life possible in spite of their low vision.

With that vision combined with the support of the NU Foundation, donors were identified who had the same desire to provide that kind of service.

Today patients who come to the Weigel Williamson Center receive the training and tools they need to learn how to use their remaining vision.

Technology, Dr. Shepherd said, has evolved from video magnifiers with large bulky tube style monitors, to ones with sleeker flat screens that include scan and read options, to digital eyewear, along with smartphones and tablets that are now functional low vision tools.

Even the technology once used to map the pattern of a patient’s remaining vision has improved.

“Using microperimetry we can now accurately identify the areas of impairment and preserved function in mere minutes,” Dr. Shepherd said.

An “invaluable test,” he said that is a key training element for the occupational therapist in helping patients learn how to use their remaining vision.

Even with all the advances in technology, the core of low vision rehabilitation remains that of providing a service that is compassionate and caring.

The true measure of success, Dr. Shepherd said, still comes in the transformation he sees in patients who come to the center depressed and leave with a new outlook on life and newfound hope.

Whether this transformation comes from the occupational therapy that helps them to enjoy reading, cooking or a favorite hobby, or from one of the many workshops offered by staff that gives the patient a sense of community and shared experience, the outcome is very rewarding.

“The Weigel Williamson Center has become a model for other centers around the country that are looking to bring the same type of services to their patients,” Dr. Shepherd said. “I am very excited to see where we will be in another 10 years.”
Like most Midwesterners, Gary McGregor, 76, worked hard all of his life, raised a family with his wife Shirley, and looked forward to a retirement spent enjoying time with his grandchildren.

What he didn’t expect was to lose part of his vision.

“I knew something had changed, not drastically but something definitely had begun to change,” McGregor said.

A visit to an eye doctor and McGregor discovered he had the dry form of macular degeneration.

“At first it was OK and they watched it for six months at a time, but all of a sudden things were not right,” he said.

McGregor began to notice wavy lines form in his vision. By the time he returned to his eye doctor in August 2017, his condition had worsened to the wet form of macular degeneration and he lost sight in his right eye.

Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) affects 1.75 million Americans. There are two types, wet and dry, with most AMD starting as the dry type and in some individuals progressing to the wet type. The degenerative condition affects the central part of the retina and results in distortion or loss of the person’s central vision hence the wavy lines McGregor saw.

This new diagnosis changed Gary and Shirley’s lives. They moved from Hartington to Seward, Neb., to be closer to family. With the help of their son, they found an eye doctor near their new home and as fate would have it, the physician referred the couple to a satellite low vision clinic that had opened in Lincoln.

The satellite clinic of the Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation operates out of the Taylor Meadows Medical Center and is one of three such satellite clinics in operation. The other two are in Hastings, Neb., and Sioux City, Iowa.

When he met John Shepherd, M.D., director of the Weigel Williamson Center and an assistant professor of ophthalmology at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, McGregor was reassured he would not go blind.

“At my very first appointment it was clear that there were things they could do to help with my vision challenges and there was a new life you could never imagine,” he said.

Today, McGregor can read his mail, watch his favorite game show, “Wheel of Fortune,” and recognize people once again when they walk into a room.

He credits occupational therapist, Stacy Thoene, for teaching him how to adapt the way he was seeing and how to read using various devices including his new bioptic telescopic glasses.

“I have 11 grandkids and one great-grandson, each with a different personality. I can see them smiling at me or sticking their tongue out,” McGregor chuckled.

“To see their facial expressions again is really precious.”

As for the methods, tools and techniques he’s encountered through the Weigel Williamson Center, McGregor said:

“It’s like a new beginning, you just feel like you get your life back.”
Donor Profile:

Dr. Gerald Christensen

Gerald Christensen, M.D., admits that early in his career he held a belief common among ophthalmologists at the time about how to treat patients with low vision.

“I was brought up with the notion that you can’t do much about low vision except magnifiers,” he said.

“But then I came across information that started to change my mind.”

Christensen, a 40-year-plus member of the University of Nebraska Medical Center Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences faculty, said he began to realize that through ongoing therapeutic assistance, people with low vision could successfully adapt their lives so to gain maximum benefit from their remaining sight. By working with health care professionals specially trained in this area, some patients could once again read a newspaper, cook in their homes or drive a car.

Dr. Christensen was fully on board when the idea to build a stand-alone facility for low vision patients at the medical center was first launched. He served as interim director of the Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation until John Shepherd, M.D., the center’s first director, was hired. And he and his wife, Mary Haven, were among the first donors to support the building project.

Today, 10 years after the opening of the center, Dr. Christensen said he and Mary are very pleased that the center is so popular with patients, many who can now live more independent lives. He’s also glad that the care for those with low vision has evolved during his professional life.

“We’ve come a long way — started from zero with magnifiers and now have very sophisticated equipment that the Weigel Williamson staff can use to train patients. That’s outstanding.”

Testimonials

“It was like a high for me and my daughter. I had resigned myself to the fact that I would not be able to read again. Then the doctor pulled out his treasure chest (of devices)! I am telling everybody about you!”

— Elouise Green

“I have macular degeneration and glaucoma. Because of all the hints, ideas and visual aids provided, I can do more at home. We have added dots to the microwave controls so I can find them easier and bought black dinner plates to use when the food is light colored. I’ve learned to use my peripheral vision to look at things, especially the people around me and I often use the lighted magnifier to read menus in restaurants. I am enjoying all of these visual aids and I tell everyone I know what a great service you provide.”

— Joseph Fanciullo

“Thank-you so much for being there when Bob and I were feeling so desperate over my low vision issues. The things you said and did changed our whole perspective and gave us hope.”

— Jean and Bob Peterson

“Macular degeneration has stolen my parents’ vision over the years. While Mom still has most of her eyesight in the left eye, Dad’s vision is limited to peripheral vision in both eyes. Even so, Dad sees better with less vision than Mom. He has learned by trial and error for the last 25 years to focus on the good spots in his field of vision. Mom is sad and frustrated because she hasn’t learned to compensate for her more recent losses. This is where the occupational therapist, Stacy, at Weigel Williamson performed her miracle. Stacy explained that we read by making sense of a whole phrase, and when there are blind spots there is not enough information to the brain. The meaning is jumbled. We have to relearn and read word-by-word in the sweet spots of the vision. Stacy placed her finger at the end of each word and told Mom to slow down and read each word. It moved her eyes just enough to bring the word into focus. Mom’s face lit up as she read, sentence by sentence. These are not-so-small miracles for my parents and we are very grateful for their help.”

— Linda Hayek daughter of Dottie Deboer
A Place for Renewed Hope and Help for Those with Low Vision

THE STAFF OF THE WEIGEL WILLIAMSON CENTER FOR VISUAL REHABILITATION

John D. Shepherd, M.D.
Director, Weigel Williamson Center
Muriel Jepsen, O.D.
Optometrist
Pat Jones, R.N., B.A., N.
Clinic Supervisor
Evy Katz, OTR/L
Low Vision Occupational Therapist
Stacy Thoene, OTD R/L
Low Vision Occupational Therapist
Kristen Mercado, OTD R/L
Low Vision Occupational Therapist
Kim Cox Yahnke, OTR/L
Low Vision Occupational Therapist
Linda Chilcott, M.Ed., COA
Ophthalmic Associate
Nanci Just
Receptionist

The Weigel Williamson Center is a service of the Stanley M. Truhlsen Eye Institute. It relies on the generosity of donor support in order to fulfill its mission of hope and help for those with low vision.

Weigel Williamson Center for Visual Rehabilitation

10th Anniversary Open House
2 – 5 pm | Sept. 21

Remarks by Dr. John Shepherd at 4 pm
Event parking available