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Lions Club members 'see' benefits - Vision care is aided by program

By Ann DeFrange, Staff Writer

What is a Melvin Jones, anyway? Why does everybody want one, and how hard are they to get?

Each of the 95 members of the Oklahoma City Downtown Lions Club has one, so they can proudly introduce themselves as a 100 percent Melvin Jones club.

The "what" began as a "who," explained Pat Shurley, a local Lions Club executive.

A man with that name was a founding father of Lions Club International almost 90 years ago.

Since his time, Lions has become one of the largest charitable donors in the world.

In his honor, members who raise or donate \$1,000 to the Lions Clubs International Foundation (LCIF) for blindness prevention campaigns become members of a fellowship named for him.

They call the award a Melvin Jones.

To celebrate the upcoming 90th anniversary next year, Downtown Lions raised and donated \$1,000 for each member.

Shurley said the Downtown club is, in fact, one of the founder clubs, organized as a group even before the international umbrella organization formed and encompassed it in 1917. In the 1960s, the LCIF was established to support humanitarian goals.

And if the non-Lion laity isn't familiar with Melvin Jones, almost everybody knows about Helen Keller.

In 1925, she and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, appeared before the Lions International convention, and challenged members to become "knights of the blind."

Since then, Shurley said, service projects have focused on sight and prevention of blindness. International clubs have given \$130 million to that cause. They have built eye hospitals and arranged cataract surgeries. They turned their attention to a Third World epidemic, river blindness, and tried to eliminate the black flies that carry the disease.

Locally, Lions hire out as parking valets and concessionaires at local sporting events. They cook pancakes and sell Christmas fruit.

Their salaries pay for vision medical professionals for patients with little means.

Shurley rolls out the numbers for the worldwide organization.

Some 24 million people have avoided serious vision loss through Lions prevention programs. Some 65 million people have been treated for river blindness. Cataract surgery was made possible for 143 million people.

Some 258 eye hospitals or clinics have opened. About 68,000 ophthalmologists and nurses and vision professionals received support. About 15,000 cornea transplants have been made possible. Lions have donated \$50 million to research into macular degeneration and in childhood vision loss.

Their influence is so widespread by now, Shurley said, that, "If we quit right now and did nothing else for eyesight, blindness in the world would double by 2020."

A Melvin Jones to all of them.