

Dr. Jules Stein: An Eye for Effectiveness and a Feel for Others

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I sometimes feel in the world that I live in, that scientific events are not paid enough attention to, and I think that's what's so critical in moving progress in this country.

Growing up, my grandfather liked to boast about his versatility as an ophthalmologist, as a musician and as a businessman. You see, while practicing ophthalmology at Cook County Hospital, and later in private practice in Chicago, he was in a band and he was also booking bands on the side. Very soon, Benny Goodman and Guy Lombardo occupied so much of his time, and he became so successful in the music business, that my grandfather realized he had to choose between his two loves, music and medicine.

In hindsight, I think we can all say it's a good thing that he chose music and built Music Corporation of America, because in the second part of his life he returned to his first love: medicine. The same commitment, same drive, energy and heart that he had devoted to building MCA, he devoted to establishing Research to Prevent Blindness, a nonprofit organization that would change the landscape of vision research in this country.

He had a great sense of obligation, a fiercely generous philanthropic spirit, and a passion that led others to want to contribute, which I think is so critical to amassing the support one needs for medical research.

There's no doubt that my grandfather loved business and enjoyed the power MCA wielded. Who wouldn't enjoy representing Jack Benny, Alfred Hitchcock, Betty Davis, and, yes, Ronald Reagan? But in vital ways, I think my grandfather cared more about the power his business success gave him to pursue his most important life's work, the fight to prevent blindness. He liked to say to me, "I will be remembered more for whatever I have achieved in preventing blindness than for all the success I have attained in the world of business."

I knew him well in the last two decades of his life, and it was clear that he displayed the same brilliance and determination in waging the battle against blindness that he had marshaled in building one of America's great entertainment companies.

When my grandfather, along with a few other distinguished leaders and philanthropic allies such as Mary Lasker, Robert McCormack, James Adams and my father, William Vanden Heuvel, founded Research to Prevent Blindness (RPB) in 1960 there were several hundred organizations nationwide spending billions to provide services to the blind and visually impaired. But there wasn't a single organization dedicated to eradicating the many diseases that cause blindness. My grandfather believed that blindness was most effectively fought at the points of prevention and treatment.

The magnitude of his impact on eye research is difficult to measure because each of his initiatives, married to his dedication to philanthropy, has had a significant ripple effect over the decades -- influencing nearly every major scientific advance in the field.

RPB, for example, has supported thousands of eye research studies and hundreds of vision researchers through its grants, which total more than \$316 million, cumulatively. And, let me tell you that my grandfather would greatly value that RPB has attained an enviable record of efficiency and economy of operation, enjoying the lowest historical fundraising expense ratio among all major nonprofit foundations in this country.

Dr. Sieving, we are proud to claim you -- any conflicts of interest aside -- as one of the vision scientists to whom RPB gave research support earlier in your research career. You are emblematic of the many distinguished careers in ophthalmology that RPB has helped nurture and advance.

Here's another measure of my grandfather's impact. In 1966, my grandfather with my grandmother, Doris -- who was an unwavering ally and who in many ways really was central in encouraging him to return to his first love, medicine and vision research -- founded the Jules Stein Eye Institute. Today, it's known throughout the world for its excellence in eye research, its training of hundreds of exceptional vision scientists, and its success in treating and preventing eye disease.

But we gather at the National Eye Institute this cold afternoon to celebrate its work -- your work -- and in that connection to note how proud my grandfather was of the role played by RPB in initiating and spearheading the charge to create the NEI within the National Institutes of Health. Today, the NEI is the largest supporter of eye research in the world, period, with its annual grant budget of approximately \$650 million. That's extraordinarily important, and may we continue to grow that amount, even in these times.

There's a mysterious element to the story of how my grandfather played a role in creating the NEI. He worked with devoted and important allies, such as Mary Lasker.

The concept for an NEI was presented to Congress several times, but was rejected. Through Research to Prevent Blindness, my grandfather coordinated Congressional testimony from some of the nation's leading vision researchers, and marshaled key Congressional support, but still, there was resistance from the Johnson Administration -- from Johnson himself.

Then, it seems my grandfather and, we think, a lawyer, Ed Weisel, made a visit to the LBJ ranch where they discussed this issue. They seemed to have won Johnson's support to create the NEI. Not an easy task with a president like LBJ. To this day, no one knows what was said.

I have served on RPB's Board of Trustees since 1994. It has been a great honor to honor my grandfather's passion and commitment to preventing blindness. It is with great delight that we celebrate the important work of my grandfather, your important work and that of Research to Prevent Blindness, and unveil this wonderful bust with all of you at the NEI this afternoon! Thank you.