

# UMASS INSIGHT

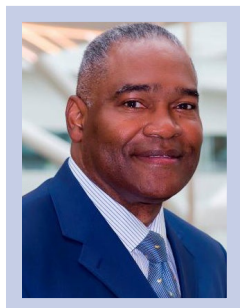


UMASS MEMORIAL  
EYE CENTER

*News from the Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences*

Winter 2021

## INSIGHT FROM VICE PRESIDENT AND CHIEF EQUITY, DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION OFFICER



*"It is not possible to be in favor of justice for some people and not be in favor of justice for all people." - Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*

My name is **Brian Gibbs** and I was recently recruited to serve as Vice President and Chief Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Officer for UMass Memorial Health Care. In this inaugural role, I will collaborate with leadership to develop a strategic plan to improve and monitor culturally competent health care, recruitment, retention, and advancement of a diverse workforce, and to reduce racial and ethnic health disparities.

As our nation, state and local communities struggle with the management of the COVID-19 pandemic, UMass Memorial has risen as a national model for its efforts. Simultaneously, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed racial inequalities and long-standing discrimination in health and health care. Following a season of highly publicized racial unrest and protests, instead of shying away and issuing only hollow statements, UMass Memorial leadership stepped up to learn from caregivers and community stakeholders about workforce challenges affecting caregivers of color.

What drew me to UMass Memorial at such a critical time as this, was a leadership team that was asking and answering the right questions and was committed to translating answers into four strategic actions:

- An urgency toward understanding and effectively addressing the disproportionate burdens posed by COVID-19 on Black, Indigenous and Communities of Color;
- An Anchor Mission dedicated to improving the health, safety, and welfare of disadvantaged communities by addressing social determinants of health;
- Discovering curative approaches to the dis-ease around, racism, sexism, and other isms, and designing novel strategies to reduce everyday bias in workplace settings; and
- Increasing the number of employees of diverse backgrounds in leadership roles.

The road to health equity is long – filled with many bumps along the way. I know the Eye Team is committed to this cause. I look forward to meeting and partnering with each of you to build new roads and bridges that expedite change and reduce our racial divide through courageous commitments, conversations, and collaborations, I believe working together we can become the change we desire to see.

**Brian Gibbs, PhD**

*VP and Chief Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Officer, UMass Memorial Health Care*

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### EYE TEAM CELEBRATES ACHIEVEMENTS WITH FIRST VIRTUAL EYE BALL

Find us online for the latest, research, publications, faculty updates & more at [www.umassmed.edu/ophthalmology](http://www.umassmed.edu/ophthalmology)

 **UMassMemorial  
Medical Center**

 **University of  
Massachusetts  
UMASS Medical School**

# UMASS INSIGHT

*News from the Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences*

## FROM THE CHAIR

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

The new Winter Edition of UMass InSight carries our new Eye Center icon, which is a depiction of our four missions: excellence in clinical care, research, commitment to education and outreach to our Worcester community. The icon is one of many changes we envisioned and implemented in 2020. As I reflect upon 2020 I can only feel deep gratitude for the privilege and the honor I had to experience this difficult year alongside you, a group of committed and dedicated caregivers who never give in and never give up. When we started 2020, and claimed it as “The Year of the Eye,” we never imagined the amount of challenge and adversity it would bring to us, to our families, to our community, to our nation and to the world. Each and every one of us experienced unprecedented struggles in 2020, not only at work, taking care of our patients, but also at home, taking care of our families. Some of us have fallen ill. Some of our loved ones have fallen ill. Many of our patients and our loved ones were anxious, and we were their only sounding board. The level of concern we all experienced this year was unmatched.

As caregivers, I am proud to say we remained committed to our calling as we continuously changed, innovated and adapted to be able to provide the same level of excellent care to our patients. Every single person on the Eye Team has contributed to this relentless effort. We learned a lot this year, about the significance of science, about the key role that we all play as caregivers, and about the importance of caring for and supporting each other. This care and support is the fuel that helped us all through this year’s demanding journey. Our team’s reputation of innovation and relentless excellence has solidified this year as we, once again, were recognized as one of UMass Memorial’s top Innovators of the Year. Our extended hours/extended access idea was recognized as a Bronze Level Award, and our Eye Team’s Virtual Idea Board won a Bronze Award, as well as a special Distinguished



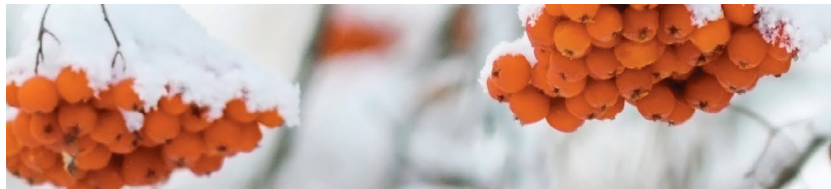
Recognition. Both original ideas have enabled us to function better as a team and to provide better care to our patients throughout challenging times. I’m incredibly proud of the Eye Team for their continued dedication, enthusiasm and imagination year after year. As we look forward to 2021, I am hopeful and excited for continued progress, advancement and growth of our department.

**Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM**

*Professor and Department Chair*

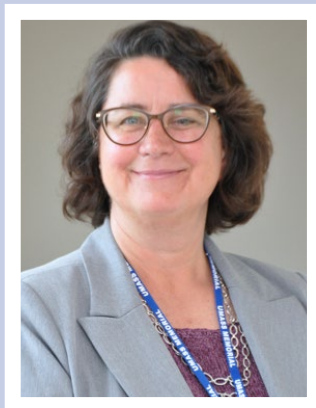
### CONGRATULATIONS EXTENDED TO DR. SCHAAL

In December 2020, **Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM**, was named President of UMass Medical Group as well as Senior Associate Dean for Health Strategies for the University of Massachusetts Medical School. “I’m honored to begin my service as the new President of UMass Memorial Medical Group,” said Dr. Schaal in a letter to physicians. “I consider myself incredibly privileged to lead this highly regarded group of physicians and caregivers who relentlessly serve the diverse community of Central Massachusetts.”



## STAFF INSIGHT

**Katherine Ribeiro, MBA**, Manager, Ambulatory and Procedural Services, Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, UMass Memorial Medical Center, joined the Eye Center in late June 2020, just as the clinic was reopening after the first surge of Covid. The first challenge was to make sure that the patients and staff felt safe and then to welcome the patients back for their ongoing eye care needs.



Katherine previously was a medical office manager for 10 years at a multisite practice. Immediately prior to coming to UMass Memorial Medical Center, she worked at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and ran a master's degree program for MDs. Her background

also includes business experience in process improvement in many industries from auto manufacturing to banking and investments. She earned her Bachelor of Science from Georgetown University and an MBA from Boston College.

The daughter of a doctor, Katherine has spent much of her life working with and for doctors. She enjoys coordinating the weekly virtual team huddles and helping

the clinic run smoothly in order to meet the needs of the patients, staff and physicians. She stated that the biggest surprise in coming to the Eye Center was the warmth of the staff in spite of the challenges presented by the pandemic. "The staff never forget that the patients are at the center of all that we do."

## EYE CENTER RECOGNIZED AS TOP INNOVATORS ... TIMES TWO!

Anytime "team spirit" is listed as a project resource, you can be sure it'll be a recipe for success! And that was certainly the case for the UMass Memorial Eye Center when their fortitude earned them not one, but two 2020 Innovators of the Year awards!

Like many teams during the pandemic, the Eye Team was unable to meet in person to hold their weekly idea board huddles. For a such a highly creative group, they quickly felt the void. And as the pandemic changed the way they were able to care for patients, they realized they needed this outlet for innovation more than ever. The team rallied to invent a virtual idea board so they could begin meeting and getting their creative juices flowing again! The board garnered the attention and admiration of numerous virtual visitors from both inside and outside of the organization who looked to us for inspiration as they developed their own virtual idea boards. For this outstanding commitment to process improvement, the team was recognized with a Bronze Innovators of the Year award and a Distinguished Recognition award!

But they weren't done yet! As UMass Memorial Health Care began its recovery efforts over the summer, the Eye Team knew there were hundreds of patients who were in critical need of care. But with only eight hours in a day, what could they do? Simple. They made the impossible possible and found more hours! By adding an hour to each end of the day at two of their locations, they could now open from 7 am to 6 pm to greatly improve patient access. For their efforts, the team receive a second Bronze award! Congratulations to the Eye Team!



# UMASS INSIGHT

*News from the Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences*

## STUDENT INSIGHT

### POSTDOCTORAL FELLOWSHIP AWARDED TO LAURA MORENO-LEON, PHD

**Laura Moreno-Leon, PhD**, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences, at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, has won the prestigious Horae Gene Therapy Center Postdoctoral Research Fellowship award. This award will help Dr. Moreno-Leon continue her studies on understanding the molecular underpinnings of X-linked retinitis pigmentosa, a debilitating inherited blindness disorder caused by the death of our light-sensing neurons called photoreceptors.

"I am honored to receive this fellowship. This is a great opportunity for me and will help me gain experience in the field and move my career toward becoming an independent scientist," said Dr. Moreno-Leon.

Dr. Moreno-Leon works in the laboratory of **Hemant Khanna, PhD**, an Associate Professor and Director of Basic and Preclinical Research component of the Advanced Ocular Therapeutic Program (AOTP), UMass



Medical School ([www.umassmed.edu/khannalab](http://www.umassmed.edu/khannalab)). Dr. Khanna said, "Dr. Moreno-Leon has a strong grasp on nucleic acid biology and basic cellular and molecular mechanisms underlying gene expression regulation." In the Khanna Lab, she's working to gain novel insights into the role of Retinitis Pigmentosa GTPase Regulator (RPGR), a frequently mutated protein in X-linked retinitis pigmentosa, in modulating the dynamics of sensory cilia. These sensory cilia help our photoreceptors detect and process the light signal. "I am proud of Dr. Moreno-Leon's achievement and thank the review committee for recognizing the

potential of her work," said Dr. Khanna.

By utilizing patient-derived fibroblasts, induced pluripotent stem cells, and mouse and porcine models of retinal degeneration, Dr. Moreno-Leon's work in the Khanna Lab will reveal new knowledge of disease mechanisms, and provide an excellent platform to design and test new therapies for blinding diseases.

## VIRTUAL VISION SEMINAR SERIES

*Please Join Us Every Third Thursday of the Month for Our*

**Virtual Eye Center Zoom Conference - 6 to 7 pm**

<https://www.umassmed.edu/ophthalmology/education/vision-seminar-series>

Hosted by: Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences  
University of Massachusetts Medical School, Worcester, MA

Virtual Eye Center Zoom Conference: <https://umassmed.zoom.us/j/95089221780> Password: 341568



## COMMUNITY INSIGHT

### BLIND DATE EVENT PROVES EYE OPENING EXPERIENCE FOR CAREGIVERS

Caregivers and researchers from the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences at UMass Memorial Health Care and the University of Massachusetts Medical School are dedicated to preserving and improving the vision of our community members. They've had years of training, they're experts in their field, and they know a great deal about the structure and functions of the eyes. But what they may not understand first-hand, is what it's like to be a visually impaired person in society.

"We care for visually impaired people in our clinics and work to develop treatments in our labs each and every day," said **Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM**, Chair of the department and President, UMass Memorial Medical Group. "But most of us don't know what it's like to walk in the shoes of a patient who is blind or has restricted sight. This event allowed us to do just that; and it was very eye opening."

Partnering with VISIONS Consulting L3C, the eye team participated in a "Blind Date" event held at Tower Hill Botanical Gardens in Boylston. Each team member was partnered with a sighted guide, blindfolded and given a white cane. They then walked through a simulated trip to the UMass Memorial Eye Center, following every step of a visit from registering and signing paperwork, to undergoing an eye exam and surgical procedure, and finally taking a walk around the beautiful gardens, which they were taught to appreciate differently by accessing their other senses of touch, smell and hearing.

Participants were observed during their visits and received feedback at the end of the simulation that detailed their behaviors: "She had difficulty signing her form." "She awkwardly found and sat in her chair." "He hesitated to walk through the doorway without his guide." Caregivers shared how difficult it can be to depend on someone else to guide them, and how disconnected some felt without the use of their eyes to inform them.

"I think an experience like this makes us all more compassionate and better caregivers," noted Dr. Schaal. "It's easy to get caught up in our busy days and rush. But a simulation like this teaches us to slow down and consider how our patients are feeling and what hurdles they may be experiencing during a visit. Taking the time to be sure they're comfortable, that we're not moving along too quickly – these are important mental notes we have to make to ensure we're delivering the best possible care and a positive patient experience."



### FACULTY INSIGHT

#### **LAUREN BRANCHINI, MD ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY**

Lauren Branchini, MD, joined the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences in summer 2020. She is delighted to provide comprehensive eye care and to be part of a cohesive group of outstanding colleagues. She believes in compassionate, multidisciplinary patient-centered care and the free exchange of information and ideas.

Dr. Branchini completed her residency at Tufts/ New England Eye Center after graduating from Boston University School of Medicine.

She has a particular clinical interest in medically treated diseases of the retina, including diabetic retinopathy



and macular degeneration. She has a background in retinal imaging research having completed a research fellowship focusing on the use of optical coherence tomography (OCT) in retinal diseases as a collaboration between the Research Laboratory for Electronics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Tufts/New England eye center.

Dr. Branchini is working on a project that is a collaboration between the UMass Family Medicine Department and AEYE health. This group is working to study an artificial intelligence tool in evaluation of diabetic retinopathy. Over the past six months, she has focused on patient safety and optimization of the patient clinical experience. She is also excited to be involved in resident and medical student education.

### FACULTY INSIGHT

#### **HUAN MENG MILLS, MD ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY**

Huan Mills, MD, joined the UMass Memorial Medical Center in August 2020. She grew up locally in Westborough, Massachusetts, and she is excited to be able to serve the community where she was raised and trained. Dr. Mills has been dedicated to the field of ophthalmology since completing her undergraduate degree in biology at the University of Michigan. After

graduating, she joined the Johns Hopkins Wilmer Eye Institute where she conducted translational research and coordinated clinical trials in the Cornea Department. After her time at Johns Hopkins, she matriculated at the University of Massachusetts Medical School where she graduated at the top of

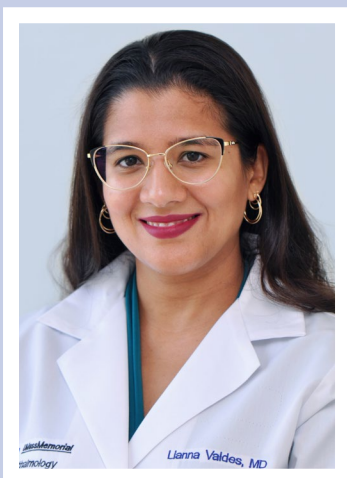


her class and was inducted into Alpha Omega Alpha medical honor society. After completing medical school, she moved to Boston to complete her residency training in ophthalmology at the Tufts New England Eye Center. At the annual graduation, Dr. Mills was awarded the Charles Preefer Award for outstanding ophthalmology research. Dr. Mills is excited to return to UMass and join the Eye Team family as an assistant professor of ophthalmology. In addition to providing excellent medical and surgical eye care, she seeks to inspire the next generation of medical students and residents to pursue careers in ophthalmology.

## FACULTY INSIGHT

### LIANNA VALDES, MD ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF OPHTHALMOLOGY

Lianna Valdes, MD, joined the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences in September 2020. She studied biology as an undergraduate at Yale University and earned her medical degree at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons. Her internship was completed at the Mary Imogene Bassett Medical Center in Cooperstown, New York, and her ophthalmology residency at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse, New York. She is no longer impressed by Massachusetts winters after living in Upstate New York for four years.



Dr. Valdes is trained in comprehensive ophthalmology and performs cataract surgery. She has also completed a fellowship in uveitis and ocular immunology at the Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary and is specialized in the care of patients with uveitis, including management of systemic immunomodulatory therapy. She has enjoyed expanding the uveitis service and collaborating with Priya Janardhana, MD, on the most complex cases.

While most of her time is dedicated to serving the community as a clinician, Dr. Valdes is also committed to supporting and contributing to the growth of the residency program. Coming from a small program herself, in which there were only two residents in her own class, she hopes to provide useful insight to influence the structure of the training program in ways that will help the residents to flourish and become competent and confident ophthalmologists.

## EYE CENTER EMBRACES COMMUNITY CHANGE

The year 2020 held significant meaning and high expectations for the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. What started off as a joyous celebration of the Year of the Eye – with the completion of the first year of their residency program and anticipation of a new clinic location in Northborough – quickly shifted focus to all things COVID-19 and efforts to keep our community members and caregivers safe. However, while still in the midst of the fight against the coronavirus, our country was faced with yet another heart-wrenching crisis – this time focused on systemic racism and social injustice.

Serving as home to one of the most culturally diverse departments here, the team placed all eyes on the future. Looking at the crises through the lenses of a both a health care provider and a community leader, it was evident that it was time for change and a fresh start. The first place they looked was to the face of the Eye Center – its icon. With the department's four missions in mind – clinical excellence, advanced research, superb education and strong community outreach, **Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM**, chair of the department, wanted to ensure that the Eye Center artwork presented a fresh, modern look that spoke to those missions.

The end result creates a unified message of inclusion and excellence in eye care with each mission being carefully and artistically incorporated into the new icon.

**CLINICAL EXCELLENCE - ADVANCED RESEARCH  
SUPERB EDUCATION - STRONG COMMUNITY OUTREACH**



UMASS MEMORIAL  
**EYE CENTER**

# UMASS INSIGHT

*News from the Department of Ophthalmology & Visual Sciences*

## EYE TEAM CELEBRATES ACHIEVEMENTS WITH FIRST VIRTUAL EYE BALL

Twenty-twenty, the Year of the Eye, held high hopes for the Department of Ophthalmology and Visual Sciences. And while the pandemic may have altered their plans, it didn't dampen their spirits. Instead, team members became stronger together as they powered through this unprecedented year. To celebrate the holidays and their outstanding accomplishments, the team enjoyed a virtual gathering in early December. More than 100 participants from 58 households over three continents (America, Europe and Africa), joined to create one final memory from a historic year.

**Shlomit Schaal, MD, PhD, MHCM**, Chair of the Department and President, UMass Memorial Medical Group, thanked her team for their commitment to their patients and one another, sharing, "This was an incredible year and I've never been prouder of all of you and all that you've accomplished together during a year filled with tremendous challenges."

During the event, team members were treated to a touching video year in review, followed by sincere words of gratitude from honored guests, **Eric Dickson, MD**, President and CEO, UMass Memorial Health Care; **Terrance Flotte, MD**, Provost and Dean, University of Massachusetts Medical School; and **Diana Caffarena**, Senior Vice President of Ambulatory Services, UMass Memorial Medical Center. Team members then were invited to share their hidden talents, including beautiful music, song and poetry performances.



UMASS MEMORIAL  
**EYE CENTER**

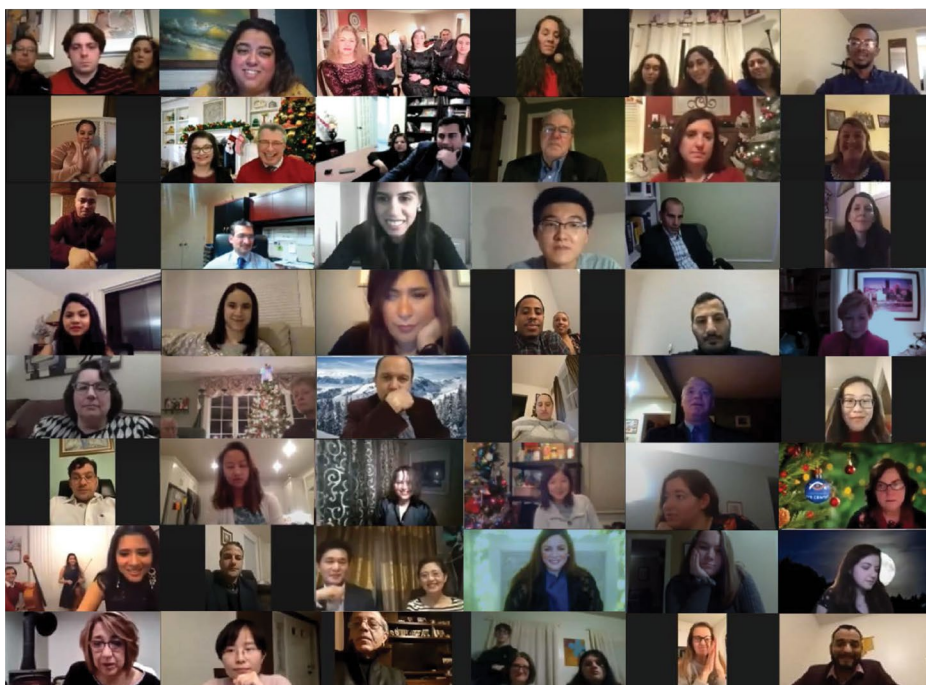
### RECOGNITION AWARDS FOR THE EVENT INCLUDED:

#### MOST IMPLEMENTED IDEAS IN 2020:

- 1st Place – **David Rivera**, Technician
- 2nd Place – **Sherri Granger**, Technician Lead
- 3rd Place – **Manisha Anand**, Technician

#### EYE CENTER AWARD OF EXCELLENCE FOR OUTSTANDING SERVICE IN PROMOTING THE DEPARTMENT'S MISSION IN 2020:

- **Sherri Granger**, Technician Lead
- **Diamond Parrilla**, ASR Lead



*2020 Virtual Eye Ball Celebration*



Find us online for the latest, research, publications, faculty updates & more at [www.umassmed.edu/ophthalmology](http://www.umassmed.edu/ophthalmology)

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