Beating Blindness
In Alabama’s Black Belt
Dear Alumni and Friends,

On Friday, May 24th, the class of 2002 participated in the school’s 29th graduation ceremony, which, in recent years, has taken the form of a doctoral convocation and hooding ceremony. This year’s class achieved a major milestone in the school’s 32-year history: They are the first class in which every class member passed Parts I and II of the National Boards on the first attempt.

This year the graduates had an opportunity to hear from several outstanding speakers. Dr. Robin Marbourg, president of the UABSO Alumni Association, offered her new colleagues words of encouragement and support, while class president Sally Wong Moore gave a moving retrospective of the last four years and how the class had changed. Dr. Anthony Adams, Professor and Dean Emeritus of the University of California, Berkeley School of Optometry, gave the convocation address. He chose as his topic: “Optometry: A Century of Change and a Bright Horizon.” The complete text of Dr. Adams’s speech along with photos will be published in the fall issue of Focal Point.

Dr. Melvin Shipp was selected by the class to present the candidates for the doctor of optometry degree. A doctoral hood was placed on each graduate by Drs. Jimmy Bartlett and Lawrence Mays, chairs of the Departments of Optometry and Physiological Optics, respectively. For the first time in school history, the Optometric Oath was administered to the graduates by Dr. Shipp.

This very special program centered on the graduates and their families, friends, and invited guests. The reception following the ceremony gave faculty, alumni, and staff an opportunity to say goodbye and offer the class of 2002 best wishes as they begin their professional careers.

The facilities of the school continue to evolve. The new Functional Neuroimaging Facility is nearing completion under the directorship of Dr. Larry Mays, complete with a new building to house the magnet for this magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) facility. This unique facility will allow investigators to image the functioning visual system during visual and oculomotor tasks. It is the only facility of its kind in the South, and one of only three in the United States. Such innovative technologies serve to keep UAB vision scientists on the leading edge of research.

A newly designed and enlarged Clinical Eye Research Area has been completed on the fourth floor of the Peters Building. This new area effectively doubles the amount of space available for all types of clinical research. Within the school, clinical eye research has become increasingly pivotal in clinical trials and other types of clinical research; this new facility should help facilitate the accompanying space and research needs.

Finally, support for the clinic renovation from alumni and friends has been significant. You can track our progress on pages 18 and 19 of this issue.

John F. Amos, O.D.
Interim Dean, UAB School of Optometry
Eye disease is rampant in many of Alabama’s poorest counties. But UAB’s Vision Science Research Research Center (VSRC) aims to change that—and the Center’s efforts already indicate that there’s light at the end of the tunnel.

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The Campaign/Development 18  News of important renovation and service funding—along with a challenge to UABSO alumni.
In May of 2002 *The Birmingham News* called it “Alabama’s Third World”—a region so wracked by poverty and illness that many of its residents’ quality of life and life expectancies are lower than those of Vietnam and Colombia. The area in question is the Black Belt, and the *News* dubbed it a “blighted land of forgotten promise.”

The same week that the *News*’s special report was published, a converted school bus pulled into the Perry County seat of Marion. Staffed by Lions Club volunteers and UAB vision scientists and optometrists, the mobile laboratory set up shop to test Perry County residents for glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy.

The *News* concluded its report with the claim that “most Alabamians are blind to the Black Belt.” But the UAB School of Optometry (UABSO)-led Rural Alabama Diabetes and Glaucoma Initiative (RADGI) constitutes a noteworthy exception—one where vision itself literally hangs in the balance.

### A Passion for Prevention

It isn’t difficult to get Kent Keyser, Ph.D., Mary Jean Sanspree, Ph.D., and Chris Girkin, M.D., talking about glaucoma and diabetes. These scientists of the Vision Science Research Center (VSRC), which is housed in the UABSO, and the UAB Department of Ophthalmology are passionate about fighting the diseases—not only because of their dire consequences for vision, but also because of the insidious way the diseases advance on their victims.

“Both diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma are subtly debilitating,” Keyser explains, “because little by little you lose parts of your visual fields. That degeneration happens so slowly that a person isn’t aware of it until significant visual field loss has occurred. It’s common for a person to be suffering from either of these diseases and not have any idea of it. Glaucoma is especially difficult because—unlike diabetes—there are generally no symptoms whatsoever. Little by little, your visual field just shrinks.”

“I generally explain diabetic retinopathy in layperson’s terms as something like little strokes in the back of the eye,” Sanspree adds. “Little sections of the eye die, so that no information can get to the nerve. These blood clots or strokes on the vascular system of the eye destroy the paths for information. So parts of the eye are dying, but you don’t know it.”

So how did this passion for early detection lead from the labs of the VSRC to screening forays into the poorest parts of Alabama? Keyser and Sanspree perceived the need for diagnosis in the Black Belt—and also saw screenings as the ideal way to implement vision research in a dynamic way.

“Research is essential, but it requires you to think long-term; it’s not going to solve health care problems immediately, in six months or a year,” Keyser says. “Mary Jean and I felt that it was also important for the VSRC to have another project that would do something more immediately for eye health in the state.”

“The prevalence of eye disease in African American populations is much worse than in Caucasians—a dramatic difference. And our goal has been for the VSRC to extend its activity outside supportive basic research into projects that would have more immediate impact for our constituents, the citizens of Alabama. The Black Belt was a perfect match between the state’s needs and UAB’s resources.”

Drs. Kent Daum and Mary Jean Sanspree prepare to test a patient.
**Streamlined Screenings**

The scene at the Perry County Health Department on the perfect blue-sky day of the first screening is a striking combination of rural quiet and high-tech industriousness. In the distance, an antebellum mansion stands over fields as a reminder of the past—while the Alabama Lions Sight screening bus parked in front of the health building holds the promise of tomorrow’s medical technology.

Clad in their signature orange vests, volunteers from the Lions Club of Marion work outside the bus, helping patients complete an inventory interview of their medical vision history. The interview is followed by a finger-stick glucose test—a dual test that assesses current and three-month-average blood sugar levels. The test takes 10 minutes to read; in that time, patients move into the mobile unit for a visual acuity test and two glaucoma tests: a tonometry exam for eye pressure, and a non-mydriatic camera test that examines the back of the eye. During their time in the unit, patients deal directly with several of UAB’s top vision scientists, including Sanspree, as well as UABSO professors Kent Daum, O.D., and Dennis Pillion, Ph.D. The process is streamlined enough to allow researchers to test between 100 and 200 people in a day, and—to allow for maximum effect—is scheduled over six hours that span two shifts at the local factories.

“We have some remarkable technologies at work in the bus,” Sanspree says. “We conduct the non-mydriatic exam with a new digital camera that can photograph the back of the eye without dilating, which saves us half an hour on the tests. It’s a non-invasive technique that saves time and allows us to get good information, and it also gives us a computer image we can refer to later to chart disease progress.”

Sanspree and Keyser are keenly aware that all the technology in the world would fall short, however, without sound follow-ups to the screenings. As Keyser puts it, “If we just go down and screen without a referral mechanism in place, we might as well not bother.” So the RADGI follows up technology with old-fashioned community. The network of supporters and collaborators for the initiative includes social workers from county health departments and Alabama Lions Sight volunteers who act as local contacts for patients who need further treatment.

“We may bring the testing equipment and expertise to the county,” Sanspree says, “but for following up on the screening, local collaborators can do much better. Some of these volunteers are church members or neighbors to the patients who need to see a doctor; they’ll make sure they make the trip.”

Although the initiative was conceived as a service outreach, the specifics of what happens after the screening days may hold the key to important research in the future. As Sanspree notes, the RADGI’s successes and failures could provide valuable information for planning similar efforts elsewhere.

“Ultimately, we hope to study the project’s effectiveness as an educational intervention—to look at the social workers’ statistics and determine our success or failure rate for follow-ups to the screenings,” she says. “Did we over-refer? Did we under-refer? Of those patients who went to physicians, how many of them actually had a significant problem? From there, we’d like to gauge the level of compliance with treatments.”

Such findings could have global consequences, because this poorest section of Alabama could serve as an apt training model for interventions in third-world countries. Sanspree and Keyser hope the project’s findings might be of use to agencies such as the World Health Organization.

“There is a key parallel between the Black Belt and third-world nations,” Sanspree notes. “And that is a lack of transportation to health care—namely, health care being far removed from the patient’s home, with no easy way to get to it. If our referral system is effective at getting people to doctors who can help them, it should be useful for public-health planning in other countries.”

**Getting Closer to the Community**

It’s no accident that a theme of networking runs through Sanspree’s and Keyser’s discussion of the RADGI—or that neither professor makes much distinction between the ivory tower and grass-roots field work. At every level, they say, one community feeds into another.

“I think one of the things that makes the project unique is how it has mobilized the resources of so many different areas and agencies in the state,” Keyser says. “It’s a partnership, a truly mutual effort.”

“Our main goal in going into these rural counties is to work closely with the local people,” Sanspree adds, “so that it’s not UAB researchers coming in and getting information and leaving. We want to start making a difference when we get there; even though we’re doing some research, we are also enhancing eye care in Alabama.”

The next step in the RADGI plan will take the UAB researchers even closer to Black Belt residents’ daily lives. Sanspree and Keyser plan to get religion—or at least get closer to it than the county health department’s parking lot.

“By autumn, we hope to schedule our trips over weekends,” Sanspree says, “so that we can go into churches. Because the churches are a central part of the community and the people can usually get transportation there, we want to set up a series of Sunday afternoon, after-church screenings.”

A technology-laden bus outside a country church on a warm Sunday afternoon: It’s an apt image for the progressive Southern focus of the initiative—a New South where medical researchers do not turn a blind eye to impoverished health, but set out to meet and improve it.

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**The BLACK BELT was a perfect match between the STATE’S NEEDS and UAB’S RESOURCES.**

— Kent Keyser, Ph.D.
It was 1:30 a.m. I was staring at the cards in my hand, wondering how in the world I was going to avoid losing my last sole (the unit of currency in Peru; about 30 U.S. cents) in a friendly game of poker. No matter which hemisphere you’re playing in, a pair of sevens usually won’t cut it in three-card draw.

I decided to see if my Peruvian friends would fall for some good old American bluffing. Iván, speaking in Spanish, asked me from across the table, “What makes you think you’re going to win this hand?” (At least, that’s what I think he asked.) I replied, “Tengo fe este vez”—I have faith this time.

Peru is all about mountains. The Incas were quite literally moving mountains a thousand years ago when they built Machu Picchu in the clouds that hover over the Andean summits. Their buildings were constructed on sheer slopes and, save for their thatched roofs, exist 100-percent intact to this day—a tribute to the extraordinary engineering of the Inca people. At its peak, the Inca Empire was the most advanced and far-reaching of any Native American civilization, ever.

But what was once a land of unprecedented power and wealth now finds itself mired in the same dire economic straits that plague most of the countries south of our border. The mountains left to conquer in Peru are mostly symbolic; political corruption, remnants of the Shining Path (Peru’s homegrown terrorist organization), and socioeconomic barriers to education and health care are seemingly as impassable as the Andes themselves.

For these reasons and others, 24 of us traveled 10 hours by plane and bus to reach our destination: a Catholic orphanage named Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II on the outskirts of Lima. Here, people like Iván had dedicated their lives to serving God by raising and teaching children that weren’t even their own. Our mission at Casa Hogar was simple: provide vision care to people in need.

We arrived in the dark and didn’t realize how good we had it until the light of morning revealed the facilities in which we’d be working. As far as makeshift eye clinics go on SOSH trips, the two-story, cinder block schoolhouse at Casa Hogar was state-of-the-art. It had bright rooms for testing visual acuities, dark rooms for performing retinoscopy, and a constant breeze through its open windows that kept those waiting in line as comfortable as possible in the equatorial heat. The building had electricity (albeit 220 volt, which, we discovered after some sparks flew, worked best with the proper transformers) for keeping our batteries charged. The best feature was a bathroom with actual plumbing that wasn’t approached by a trot down a path or a climb up a riverbank.

Over the next four days, 1,122 Peruvians passed through our temporary clinic. They were orphans from Casa Hogar; they were nuns and interpreters and family members of interpreters; they were young and old. They were not rich and poor—they were just poor. Mostly, they came from the neighboring shantytowns. One boy had recently been rescued from the jungle after a warring tribe had massacred his family. The story was so bizarre that it seemed to us more like a script from a bad Hollywood movie than the reality that it was.
Some of our patients came in wearing glasses but most had never even had an eye exam. In the end we gave away 897 pairs of eyeglasses and arranged surgery for 26 individuals at a local ophthalmology clinic. As always, the demand for our services was greater than the supply. And even though we had eye exam ‘tickets’ distributed ahead of time, many people were still turned away when we closed the clinic on our last day of work. After participating in a few of these trips you learn that, no matter how many eye exams you give, it’s never enough.

Now, back to the pair of sevens... I was about to crawl into my bunk that last night, hoping to catch a few hours of sleep before our plane departed Lima the next morning. That’s when I heard Iván calling my name, beckoning me to join him in the card game that would empty my pockets of all their dinero.

“I have faith this time,” I announced, looking confidently around at the players’ eyes. Iván and the others looked amused. None of them appeared to be falling for my bluff. Without enough to match the rising ante, I would have to fold.

As I prepared to throw my cards down for the final time, I looked up and realized that every other player at the table had already folded. They had conspired to give me the hand! Iván, who earlier had given me a rosary he had woven himself from llama wool as a symbol of our new friendship, looked at me and said, “Fe puede mover montañas”—faith can move mountains.

Our hope, as always on these SOSH missions, is to affect a life in a way that may not have been possible otherwise. Maybe we moved a few rocks on the symbolic Peruvian landscape—we don’t know for certain, because we couldn’t stay around long enough to see.

But I find it very ironic that, while we are attempting to impact our patients’ lives by improving what they see, people like Iván are trying to impact the same lives through things unseen. Faith like his, more enduring than the stones placed by the Incas centuries ago, is what will truly transform the people of his world. We are simply grateful to have been a very small part of the bigger picture.

1. A statue of the Virgin Mary of Ascuncion on a mountain that overlooks the orphanage is symbolic of the faith of the people who care for the children of Casa Hogar Juan Pablo II.

2. Despite long lines and long waits, the people of this area of Peru were grateful for our service as evidenced by their cheerful dispositions.

3. Sometimes it takes four hands (and two smiles) to do an eye exam, as Drs. Grajales and Niemann demonstrate during this pediatric evaluation.

4. Macchu Piccu seems like a storybook city built on a mountain above the clouds in a land far away.

5. The streets of Cuzco are lined with modern structures built upon ancient foundations laid by the Incas a thousand years ago.

6. Peruvian children, dressed in traditional Incan attire

7. This llama, a living relic from the age of the Inca Empire, rested at the entrance to Macchu Piccu.
Recruitment in Focus
Keeping Enrollments Healthy and Diverse

We’re all familiar with the impressive statistics on optometry as a professional field—on the career satisfaction it provides and the high standard of living it affords among health-related professions. But a school of optometry can hardly rest on these laurels if it aims to build on existing strengths. How, then, to go about improving the career prospects for graduates of a good school?

The UABSO is addressing that challenge with a two-fold focus on its student body: professional development and minority recruitment. The goal is not only to continue producing first-rate optometrists—but also to graduate a diverse class each year that is thoroughly knowledgeable about its professional prospects.

John Classé, O.D., is the UABSO faculty member in charge of professional development, and he has implemented strategies that span the entirety of a student’s tenure at the UABSO, beginning with day one.

“Our program starts in the first year,” Classé says, “with an increased emphasis on career thinking. It begins with orientation, where we encourage incoming students to begin thinking about their careers more precisely, so that they can use their time in school better to prepare themselves for graduation.

“The challenging thing about career development at this stage is that students in professional school are so busy. They tend to go from Point A to Point B to Point C, without always looking far ahead—they’re too busy to do much else because they’re just trying to survive from quarter to quarter. But we have started the process of helping students to appreciate that there is a life after school, and that those who plan for it and work actively toward that point while they’re in school are going to emerge with a better employment situation after they graduate.”

Debts and Destinations

Another component in thinking ahead—and one that can greatly affect life after graduation—is school-related debt. Too often, Classé points out, professional students accumulate significant debt during their school years. Even in a healthy economy with ample job opportunities, those debts can take a long time to resolve.

“Not only in optometry, but nearly across the board, there is a trend toward growing indebtedness for students,” he notes. “In response to that, we’ve started a program to help students aim at eliminating debt by making choices that are in their best interest financially, from sharing an apartment to minimizing their credit-card use. We demonstrate how debt is carried forward from the first year of professional school—then calculate how many years one has to work to pay off that debt to see how much it actually costs in the long run. To put it most simply, debt greatly influences career choices.”

The final step in a sound professional development program is, of course, placement—and the school has taken innovative steps to integrate it into the existing externship program. Because students spend two of their last four quarters outside the school in their choice of clinics, hospitals, or private practices, the fit is a natural complement between clinical praxis and career opportunity.

“If we’ve succeeded in keeping our students focused on career specifics throughout school, the externship gives them a terrific chance to choose a trial period in a setting where they hope to have employment,” Classé says. “That would be a great situation for them; they could plan and look ahead, find the opportunity, and use the externship as a way of making sure—on both sides—that there will be a good fit in their first job.

“We’ve never had trouble placing our graduates, but this kind of streamlining can really give them an aggressive start at a successful career.”

A Class to Reflect the Community

When Gerald Simon, O.D., graduated from the UABSO in 1985, he was the only African American student on the commencement stage. Much has changed since then, but one thing that Simon—now a professor at his alma mater—hopes to ensure is that diversity keeps progressing at a healthy rate. As the new director of minority recruitment for the school, he has established a great deal of momentum in that effort.

“It’s no challenge to sell potential students on the UABSO,” Simon says. “Our program is entwined with the medical center, which sets us apart from most schools. Our students enjoy a broader health-professions exposure, and they share the same basic-science instructors and resources as the university’s medical and dentistry students. Whereas most optometry schools are private, we are a state-supported school, which makes our tuition much more reasonable than the private schools. And our class size allows for real interaction with instructors. A number of schools accept as many as 160 students; our class size is 40. It’s a terrific value.

“So the challenge is not convincing minority students that the UABSO is a perfect choice; it’s reaching them to get that message across.”

The major growth area Simon sees in the school’s diversity future lies in the region’s historically black colleges. He notes that most of the African Americans who have matriculated at the UABSO—like Simon himself—have come to the school from historically white institutions. That tradition leaves a large resource nearly untapped.
“We want to maintain strong recruitment efforts at all colleges, but there’s a larger base of minority students at historically black institutions that we just haven’t thoroughly reached. We need to get out and market optometry as a valuable alternative to medicine and embrace these schools, to inform students what the profession is about.”

So Simon has been at work on a network of alumni and friends of the school to reach nearby historically black colleges. “I compare it to the farm systems in major league baseball,” he says, “looking for emerging talent to enlarge and enrich our applicant pool. The ‘field scouts’ in this are our alumni, who can help us tap into fertile recruitment ground out there—identifying patients who might be interested in optometry through their practice, or addressing Rotary Clubs in their areas about the profession.

“But I see these alumni as our most potent asset for reaching undergraduates at African American universities. We have alumni in Alabama and Mississippi who can network with students at Alabama A&M, Tuskegee, and Jackson State University. They can identify good candidates and send them to us.”

Simon is also aiming for a younger target group: the middle- and second-year-school audiences he reaches through speaking invitations and projects like the Community Vision Service.

“There’s no reason we should wait until potential students get to college to introduce them to optometry,” he notes. “We should also present the profession to a younger audience. Our Community Vision Service projects help us reach that age group through vision screenings. It’s not hard to see the benefit of an incoming college freshman already intent on getting a pre-optometry education, much as they would pursue premed.”

Even though such early recruitment efforts will take several years to come to fruition, current enrollment statistics at the UABSO offer plenty of encouragement for the future of a diverse profession in Alabama. Simon, once the sole African American in his class, can now point to an incoming freshman class that is nearly 25 percent minority students—and 10 percent African American. Yet he is quick to point out that minority development is about more than statistics.

“Our goal is to make our classes more diverse not for the sake of numbers, but so that the doctors we graduate will reflect the diversity of the community that supports us and that we serve,” he says. “One might ask, Who benefits from a more diverse class? The answer is simple: the community. If you look at where diseases like glaucoma and diabetic retinopathy are most prevalent, you can see the need for more black optometrists. Or in burgeoning Hispanic areas, the benefit of a Spanish-speaking optometrist is obvious.

“And it’s not just these communities that benefit from better care, but all of us.”

Make Plans for Open House

Sunday, September 8, 2002
2:00-5:00 p.m.

Meet faculty members, staff, and students ready to answer your questions about the school, prerequisite courses, curriculum, admissions, and the Optometry Admissions Test (OAT).

Special guest at this year’s Open House will be Larry DeLucas, O.D., Ph.D. (’81)—UABSO alumnus, crystallography researcher, and NASA scientist.

(For more information on Dr. DeLucas’ work, see the cover story in the Winter 2002 Focal Point.)

Events will include tours of the facility, presentations on vision science, and seminars on admissions, minority opportunities, and financial aid.

Please call (205) 934-5605 or (205) 934-6150 to confirm your attendance by August 28, 2002.
Expanding Optometry
Welcoming a New Generation of Women Faculty

At one time their goal was to graduate from optometry school in order to help others through their work in the field. Today, they are all pursuing that dream as part of the faculty at the UAB School of Optometry, sharing a passion for teaching that makes for a strong bond.

“They” are the women who make up the newest faculty members at the UABSO.

“We’re a pretty close-knit group,” says Ami Abel-Martinez, O.D., director of contact lens services. Abel-Martinez is well-qualified to make that judgment; a breast-cancer survivor, she appreciated the support of her colleagues during her treatments. The department also sponsors a team every year in the Race for the Cure for breast-cancer research.

“I love teaching,” says Abel-Martinez, who has been on faculty for four years. “I get a charge out of it every day. It’s the best job in the world.” She has had other experience against which to make that assessment. After working for five years as an engineer, she went back to optometry school intending to enter private practice, but now she is “hooked” on teaching. “I can make an impact on the whole profession,” she explains. “I’m grooming the students to be different and affect the profession in a positive way.”

“Teaching vision therapy to students is a way to get more doctors out there doing it and helping more patients than if I sat in my own practice and did therapy on my own,” agrees Kristine Becker, O.D. “I can reach more patients this way.” Her clinical emphasis is pediatrics with a specialty in vision therapy, an area that had not been emphasized in the UAB curriculum until she joined the staff.

Suzanne Simms, O.D., made her decision to become an optometrist earlier in life than Abel-Martinez or Becker. “I became fascinated with the field when I was a patient as a teenager,” she says. “I would be in awe of all the instruments and I had a million questions for my optometrist.” In addition to working in the primary care clinic and her research with glaucoma medications, Simms loves teaching. “It’s very rewarding to be a teacher. I get a lot from the students.”

Although only on the faculty for two years, Tammy Than, O.D., has already garnered an award from her students; the UAB branch of the American Optometric Student Association honored her for excellence in clinical instruction. “My hope is to get more students interested in research,” she says. “They are tomorrow’s faculty. We need to teach curiosity.” Than’s research interests are in ocular pharmacology, glaucoma studies, and dry eye research. Unlike many of the other new faculty, she is not a product of the UABSO. With a master’s degree in physical chemistry, she worked for seven years in pharmaceutical research. “It was time for a change,” she says. “I had always been interested in health care, and optometry looked like an exciting field.” Since she served her residency in Oklahoma, where optometry laws are very aggressive, she brings an interesting perspective to UAB. “I was trained to practice to the fullest capability. I want to teach students as much as possible. I want to be pressing the envelope all the time.”

The newest female member of the faculty is Marsha Swanson, O.D. She was hired as a disease and low vision faculty member in 2001 and was appointed the chief of low vision, which she describes as “a huge honor.” Her clinical emphasis is pediatrics with a specialty in vision therapy, an area that had not been emphasized in the UAB curriculum until she joined the staff.

That seems to sum up the feelings of all the new faculty members. As Than says: “It is exciting here. They’re bringing on a lot of new faculty with new ideas about teaching. We have a lot of enthusiasm, and we’re giving it our all.”
Imagine a magnet so large it weighs 14 tons and is 100,000 times stronger than the earth’s magnetic field. Lawrence E. Mays, Ph.D., chairman of the Department of Physiological Optics at UAB, has imagined that magnet for some time—but soon his imagination will no longer be required.

UAB will have a $3.7-million functional MRI installed for vision research that uses just such a magnet—making UAB one of only four sites in the world with magnets dedicated to vision science. “There is a pair at the Max Planck Institute in Germany, and there will be three others in the United States, all delivered and set up at about the same time,” Mays explains. “One is at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, the second at the Salk Institute in San Diego, and the third is here at UAB. We’re at the ground floor for this technology.”

The instrument is used strictly for animal research, Mays says. “The functional MRI looks at differences in the level of blood oxygenation,” he explains. “If you use a part of your brain to do something, you’ll have a local depletion of blood oxygen, immediately followed by an increase of oxygenated blood. The MRI is able to detect that inflow, so we’re able to see what parts of the brain are active. It’s brain mapping.”

“We ‘see’ things with our brains, as well as with our eyes,” Mays continues. “The retina provides patches of light and dark to the brain, and the brain is really what recognizes objects and people and ordinary scenes. In fact, about half of our brain is used for visual perception. Many studies involve animals and looking at their visual systems, and we know a lot of detail. But we really don’t have much detailed insight into how people actually see. There have been a lot of functional MRI studies recently in humans, but they just show patches of blood oxygenation; they don’t tell us how the visual processing is done.”

With this new and powerful magnet, the MRI experiments that have been done on people can be conducted with animals, but with much greater resolution. “We

With the knowledge acquired by this research, Mays hopes that one day there will be enough understanding of the brain’s visual functions to develop ground-breaking treatments for vision impairments. It is even possible that a visual prosthesis—similar to the cochlear implant now available for the hearing-impaired—could eventually be developed.

That’s a long-term vision, however, and for the time being, Mays is busy preparing for the magnet’s installation.

Just what kind of facility is required for a 14-ton magnet? “The magnet is a cylinder about eight feet high and seven feet in diameter,” he describes. “It stands on end, suspended in the middle of a specially-designed facility. The building is two stories high, almost like a warehouse. Because of the magnetic field, it has to be put in the middle of the building. The magnet itself is about three and a half times as powerful as the ordinary clinical magnet.” The roof on the building has a removable lift hatch; the magnet will be lowered by a crane into the building, then the roof will be replaced.

It takes several weeks after installation for the MRI to be ready for research. To work properly, the superconducting magnet must be chilled to 40˚ kelvin—a process that takes a week. Mays then estimates another six weeks of work “to get the kinks out.” He hopes by August or September to start getting images that can be used for research. “It’s cutting edge; you don’t exactly open the box and plug it in,” he laughs.
The UABSO was recently recognized by the Jefferson County Department of Health, which honored the school with the prestigious Public Health Award for its commitment to community service.

The award’s origins date back to 1972, when the UABSO Community Vision Services (CVS) program began providing eye screenings for children in Jefferson County; it has since evolved into a full-service eye care clinic. The UABSO partnered with the Jefferson County Department of Health in 1995 to provide regular vision services for patients visiting the county’s neighborhood Eye Clinic Centers. As a result of this partnership, the Northern Health Center opened in December 2000. The center is supported by the UABSO’s donations of equipment and manpower.

In ceremonies celebrating Public Health Week in April, Jefferson County Public Health Officer Dr. Michael Fleenor presented the award to the UABSO. Dr. Felton Perry (’76), director of the CVS program, accepted the award for the school. Dr. Fleenor recognized the efforts of the CVS faculty and students for the vision screening and diagnostic services provided at the Northern, Western, and Bessemer Health Clinics since 1995.

Please join us in congratulating Dr. Perry, Gerald Simon, O.D. (’85), and Ms. Jennifer Banks for their longstanding service to the community on behalf of the school.

Congratulations to Arol Augsburger, O.D., interim provost, who was awarded the Carel C. Koch Award for outstanding contributions to the enhancement and development of relationships between optometry and other professions. Robert Newcomb, O.D., president of the American Academy of Optometry presented Dr. Augsburger with the award in November 2001.

The International Biographical Centre of Cambridge, England, selected Leo Semes, O.D., as one of the 2000 Outstanding Intellectuals of the 21st Century. The criteria for being selected for this prestigious award are summed up in the following phrase: “due to the superlative merit shown in the quality of their work throughout their career.” Congratulations, Dr. Semes!

Jimmy Bartlett, O.D., interim chair of the Department of Optometry, was awarded an honorary Doctor of Science degree from the State University of New York (SUNY). Dr. Bartlett was presented the degree during the SUNY commencement ceremony in New York on June 2, 2002.

Dr. Robert Rutstein was a guest on Birmingham’s NBC 13 “Midday” Show to speak about the results of his research study on amblyopia. His research results were recently published in the March edition of the Archives of Ophthalmology.
The school is pleased to announce that UABSO third-year student Brad Hines won the Varilux Super Bowl at the American Optometric Student Association (AOSA) Convention in Philadelphia, held in January of 2002. Brad represented the UABSO in a national competition against students from other schools and colleges of optometry. The trophy rotates to the winning student’s school each year—making this is the second year the trophy has spent at the UABSO. Brad dedicated his achievement to the memory of the first winner in 1997, the late Gregory E. Steele, O.D. (1964-2001), Class of 1997.

Congratulations to J. Andrew Miller, a fourth-year student who was selected to receive the Fred and Marion Rosemore Family Foundation Scholarship. The 2002 scholarship award was given in honor of Catherine S. Amos ('74).
Dr. Jim Marbourg and Vision America have selected Brent Laircey to receive the CEVS Outstanding Student Award of $500. The purpose of this award is to recognize the significance of this course series in the professional curriculum at the UABSO and to honor the commitment and performance of an exemplary student. Congratulations, Brent!

Pam Kontzen retired from UAB on January 31, 2002, after 28 years of service. She transferred to the School of Optometry in 1984 as the manager of the Vision Science Research Center’s Histology and Tissue Processing Module. Lawrence E. Mays, Ph.D., chair of the Department of Physiological Optics, said that Mrs. Kontzen has trained generations of new graduate students, research assistants, postdoctoral scholars, and faculty in a variety of critical techniques and procedures—with consummate skill and professionalism. Before her retirement, Mrs. Kontzen was honored as the December 2001 UAB Employee of the Month. Kent T. Keyser, Ph.D., director of the Vision Science Research Center, praised Mrs. Kontzen for her dedication to UAB. He said, “Her integrity is beyond question, and she is one of the kindest, gentlest individuals I have ever met.” Congratulations, Pam, on your retirement and for achieving Employee of the Month at UAB!

Faculty member and Center for Biophysical Sciences and Engineering director Larry DeLucas, O.D., Ph.D., was awarded an honorary doctor of science degree by Ferris State University at the university’s spring commencement in May. The honorary degree was given in recognition of Dr. DeLucas’ service as a payload specialist on the 1992 Space Shuttle Columbia mission, and to acknowledge his achievements in protein crystallography (see the winter 2002 issue of Focal Point). Helping to honor Dr. DeLucas for his “contribution to his country and the world at large” was Kevin L. Alexander, O.D., Ph.D., AOA trustee and dean of the Michigan College of Optometry at Ferris State, who presented the degree.
Faculty Focus

Rodney Nowakowski, O.D., Ph.D.
Optometry and Art

He’s a musician, a painter, a geneticist, and an optometrist. Jack of all trades and master of most of them, Rodney Nowakowski, O.D., Ph.D., admits that the biggest challenge facing him now, however, is the renovation of the UAB optometry clinic. “I’m totally untrained for this,” he laughs.

As chief of staff and director of clinical programs for the UABSO, Nowakowski is responsible for overseeing the $4.5-million project while he maintains his other duties—no easy task. “It is occupying virtually all my time,” he admits. “No science, and no clinical care required; I’m just wearing a very different hat.”

Still, he learned what he needed to know to complete the design phase of the project, and if history is any gauge, he’ll learn what he needs to know for the construction phase as well.

After all, when he wanted to understand how genetics affect eye disease, he pursued a doctorate in medical genetics. As a volunteer at the Alabama Institute for the Deaf and Blind, Nowakowski saw many children with hereditary eye disease and he felt the need to better understand it. “One thing led to another, and I learned a lot more about it,” he says.

Nowakowski admits that he doesn’t know of anyone else who has combined the two fields of study, but the combination has been helpful to him.

It may also be unusual to find a scientist who is so talented in the arts, but Nowakowski is a “semiprofessional” musician and a serious artist as well. As lead guitarist for his band Rod and the Cones, Nowakowski has played gigs in jazz venues across the city. Nowadays the band is defunct (“My bass player moved to Texas and my drummer got tendonitis,” he says), but Nowakowski still continues to play duets with Tuscaloosa drummer Tom Wolfe. “He’s a superb jazz player, and we get a gig every once in a while. It’s a lot of fun.”

Nowakowski has enjoyed even more success with his artwork. Three of his oil paintings were displayed at the 2002 Energen Art Competition in April and May. “There’s a certain science behind art in terms of composition and mixture of color, which is part of light and how we perceive color,” he notes. “Ditto for music. It has a very mathematical structure to it.

“I find that art and music are often discovered among people who are interested in science and medical care. When you look into it, you’ll find a closer connection than you expected.”
Greetings, alumni,

Summer is almost over, and like every year, it seems to have flown by too quickly for me. Soon we will be seeing crisp fall days and football season will be upon us. I hope you were able to take time away from the office for a vacation. After all, life shouldn't be all work and no play.

I would like to congratulate our new alumni. Thirty-four students graduated on May 24, 2002. To these new colleagues, I extend a wish for great success in your future professional endeavors—and a reminder to join the UABSO Alumni Association.

Some of you had the opportunity to participate in the student-alumni luncheons this past spring. Alumni were invited to speak about their personal career paths and impart professional pearls to the third- and fourth-year classes. The students had the opportunity to ask questions in return, and I know the students enjoyed the interaction with alumni, not to mention the "free" lunch. If you would like to participate in the future, contact the Alumni Affairs Office at (205) 934-5605.

The association held a reception June 28 at the AOA meeting in New Orleans. It was a great opportunity to learn new advances in optometry, socialize with old friends—and enjoy wonderful food and drink.

Our summer meeting, co-sponsored with the ALOA at the Sandestin Hilton, was once again a tremendous success. If you have not yet attended, try to make it next year. This is definitely a continuing education meeting the whole family can enjoy—with beach, golf, tennis, and shopping. Congratulations to Donna Hyler Ross, the lucky alumni member who won the $200 prize drawing for a dues-paying member of the Alumni Association at the SECO reception.

All alumni are invited to attend and bring a potential applicant to the UABSO Open House on September 8 from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m. Also, don’t miss the Alumni Breakfast Meeting on Sunday, November 10, held in conjunction with the AOA fall convention. We will be sending more details about the meeting and our guest speaker soon.

I want to encourage everyone to join the Clinic Renovation Fund Raising Competition between the classes. This is a great way to say thank you to the school and invest in the future of our profession. If you have any questions, contact your class representative or Peggy Striplin at (205) 934-3839.

Hope to see you soon at the fall seminar.

Robin L. Marbourg, O.D.
President, UABSO Alumni Association

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### Alumni Dues

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<td>2001</td>
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### Alumni Dues

We would like to extend our appreciation to the following alumni who joined the UABSO Alumni Association between January 1, 2002, and May 15, 2002.
Alumni Profile

Paula R. Newsome, O.D., M.S., F.A.A.O.

Making History

She didn’t plan to attend the UABSO. A child of the 1960s, the only thing she knew about Birmingham was the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. But when Paula R. Newsome, O.D., M.S., F.A.A.O., was recruited by the School, she agreed to visit—and liked what she saw. “You can find racism anywhere and everywhere,” she says. “It’s just a matter of how you want to deal with it.”

Newsome’s particular way of dealing with it is by knocking down barriers. Upon graduation and completion of her residency, she returned to her home state of North Carolina. Only the second African American to receive a license in the state, she was the first to practice there. In fact, she was the first female to go into a solo practice in Charlotte as well. “Male bankers did not deal with me. It took a lot of fortitude,” she remembers. Patients responded to her, however, and her practice grew quickly. “I went into the community, and I was extremely involved. People got a chance to know me.”

Newsome defines community quite broadly. “My community is the world,” she says. She has travelled to Turtle Mountain Indian Reservation in North Dakota, and to South Africa, South America, and Jamaica. “I live by the principle ‘To whom much is given, much is required,’” she says. “You can’t make everything right with the world, but you can do the best you can. Do all the good you can, in all the ways you can, at all the times you can, to as many people as you can, for as long as you can. That’s my motto.”

Despite her initial reluctance during that first visit, Newsome now credits the UABSO for giving her the foundation to serve. “UAB is where I was trained, and I am forever indebted to the quality of the education that I got there. UAB is responsible for me having a sense of community, and a sense of being a member of a medical team as opposed to just being an eye doctor. I owe anything that I’ve done to my affiliation with the school.”

Alumni of the Year Award
Nominations Now Open

The UABSO Alumni Association is now accepting nominations for the Alumni of the Year Award. This award is given each year to one alumnus/alumna in recognition of his/her outstanding achievement and service to the profession and community. If you are a graduate of the UABSO and would like to nominate someone for this award, please e-mail a brief statement about the nominee’s achievements, along with your name, to Peggy Striplin at striplin@uab.edu or fax your nomination to (205) 934-6758. The deadline for entries is October 1, 2002.

Faculty Members Inducted into Hall of Fame

UABSO faculty members Lawrence J. DeLucas, O.D., Ph.D., Sc.D., and Melvin D. Shipp, O.D., M.P.H., Dr.P.H., will be among the five inductees into the National Optometry Hall of Fame this October. The induction ceremony will be held at a luncheon on Thursday, Oct. 31 in Cleveland, Ohio.

Alumni Receive State Recognition

The Alabama Optometric Association (ALOA) recently selected two UABSO graduates for its annual awards. Doug Clark (’82) was named the state’s Optometrist of the Year, while Melissa Hoercher (’95) received the organization’s Young Optometrist of the Year distinction for 2002.
Advisory Committee Profiles
Pamela and Bill Ochsenhirt

Pamela and Bill Ochsenhirt are a
dynamic young couple—and
both are members of the Dean’s
Advisory Committee.

The Ochsenhirts’ involvement
with the UAB School of Optome-
try evolved from a chance meet-
ing at Pine Tree Country Club.
Katherine Clore, O.D., an asstis-
tant professor at the UABSO, had
just finished a round of golf when
she ran into Bill Ochsenhirt, the
co-owner and manager of both
Pine Tree and Heatherwood
Country Clubs. Their discussion
revealed that Dr. Clore had the
answers to Bill’s many questions
concerning his son’s special
vision needs—questions that had
been asked in the past, but never
answered.

Fast forward. Pamela Ochsen-
hirt’s driving desire to find
answers to the “whys” of her
son’s needs and her interest in
research led to her involvement
with the Dean’s Advisory Board.
Bill soon followed suit, and both
have become solid members of the
committee with a keen inter-
est in finding answers, hopefully
through research at the UABSO.
To this end, Bill’s mother and
father have established a planned
gift to set up an endowed
research fund at the school.

Pamela grew up in Connecticut
and Florida and earned her
degree in communications from
the University of Connecticut.
Upon graduation, she moved to
Washington, D.C., to begin a
career in hotel sales manage-
ment, leaving behind her theater
 minor and her great talent for
song and dance. Bill grew up in
Virginia Beach and attended Old
Dominion University, where he
earned a degree in accounting
and then moved to
Washington, D.C.,
to take a position
with Arthur Ander-
sen & Co. Hard
work and network-
ing led Bill to a
meeting with pro-
fessional golfer Bil-
ly Casper—who was setting up a
golf management company. Bill’s
business ability and love of the
game led to a new career in golf
management.

Fast forward again. After liv-
ing in the same building for
years, Pamela and Bill finally ran
into each other in the elevator
one day, and the rest is history.
They married in 1993 and moved
to Fairhope, Alabama—a place
they chose for its beauty and
charm, and because they wanted
to be in the South, where Bill
managed a string of country
clubs. Pamela’s background led
her to become involved with the
Eastern Shore Chamber of Com-
merce, helping to promote the
area they chose to live in.

In 1994, Bill and his partner
leased Pine Tree, and the couple
made their move to Birmingham
a year later. In 2000 Heather-
wood was purchased and a major
overhaul was undertaken.
Pamela, also a sports enthusiast,
manages to play in two tennis
leagues while being mother to
Alex, Ashley, and Avery. Bill and
Pamela are both involved in their
church, Asbury United
Methodist, with Bill serving on
the Church Council and Pamela
acting as the director of the Vac-
ation Bible School.

The school has many naming opportunities available
during the renovation project. All amounts of funding
are needed and deeply appreciated. Listed below are
the first of many gifts to come.

Primary Care Module to be named “The Marco
Family Foundation Primary Care Room” in honor of
the Marco family and in memory of Seymour Marco,
O.D., a pioneer in the field of optometrics. Dr. Marco,
founder of Marco Ophthalmic, invented the Frontier
contact lens brand, which was later sold to Johnson &
Johnson/Vistakon. The Marco Family Foundation,
which was established when Seymour Marco passed
away, has been a generous supporter of optometric
research and education and has made nearly $2 mil-
lion in grants. Dr. Marco’s son, David, continues the
family tradition of strong business ethics and a strong
commitment to philanthropy as president of Marco
Ophthalmic. “Our decision to be supportive of the
renovation was primarily due to the good relationships
we’ve had with people at the school: Donald Springer,
Hank Peters, Arol Augsburger, and of course, Interim
Dean Amos,” he says. “Also, UAB really exemplifies
excellence in optometric education, and we believe
the school is very deserving of a new facility. It’s a
good cause, and that’s why we decided to continue
our grants and contributions to UAB.”

The first faculty member to commit to a naming
opportunity is Dr. Wanda Abel, with her husband Dr.
Stewart Abel. They have chosen to name the contact
lens residents’ office “The Abel Family Examination
Room: Stewart, Wanda, Mindy, Lori, Ami, and Ki.”
The Drs. Abel were excited for Wanda to be the first
faculty involved in the renovation of the ground floor
clinic area. Both the Abels have been involved in
optometric education for years. Dr. Wanda Abel said,
“As an optometrist for almost 30 years and an educa-
tor for many of those years, I can think of no better
way to say thank you than to contribute to this worthy
institution.”

The first alumni gift is actually collective—from all
the Alumni Association members. The Alumni Associ-
ation has made two pledges to the renovation. The
first will name the student break room “The Eydie C.
Jones Student Room”; the second, an operatory, will
be named “The UAB Alumni Association Examination
Room.” The Eydie C. Jones Student Room was
announced at Eydie’s retirement party last fall in
appreciation for all the lives Eydie has touched in the

Naming Opportunities Unfold
Development

Class Participation
(as of 7/8/02)

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* Some alumni have chosen to fund a room individually while others have elected to give through their practice affiliation. However, all of these alumni want to participate in the class competition and have designated part of their gift for this purpose. These alumni are counted in the class competition. Their total additional contribution is $52,175.

School. The second room was given as a commitment to the Alumni Association’s belief that the renovation is a much needed and worthy project.

The first friend to make a pledge is Ralph Winton, O.D., a graduate of another school who believes that the UABSO has been good for his home state as well as the profession of optometry. In contributing to this project, he is giving back to his community and profession. Dr. Winton has chosen an operatory in the pediatric clinic to be named in honor of the memory of his parents and his daughter. The room will be known as “The Sue and Hobert Winton and Lee Ann Winton Examination Room.”

The first company to step forward is CIBA Vision/Novartis. CIBA’s gift will be used for a naming opportunity in the contact lens module and will be named “The CIBA Vision/Novartis Ophthalmics Examination Room.” In a letter accompanying the gift, Sally Dillehay, O.D., noted that “CIBA Vision/Novartis does have a special relationship with the UAB School of Optometry.”

The first association gift is from the Alabama Optometric Association. The room will be named “The Alabama Optometric Association Examination Room” in the primary care module—befitting the association’s commitment to primary eye care in the State of Alabama. According to association president Sam Pierce, O.D., “the majority of association members are graduates of UAB, and we owe our success to the quality education we received as students at the UAB School of Optometry.”

The first group practice pledge comes from Eye Care Associates. Again, the majority of the members are UABSO graduates. The reception area has been chosen by Eye Care Associates for their naming opportunity. They will have a portion of the large reception area, which will also be used evenings and weekends for school functions and continuing education.
“The challenging thing about career development at this stage is that students in professional schools are so busy . . . just trying to survive from quarter to quarter.”

— John Classé, O.D.
Professor and Director of UABSO student professional development

“Some of our patients came in wearing glasses but most had never even had an eye exam.”

— John Essinger, O.D.
UABSO Professor and SOSH team leader

“My hope is to get more students interested in research. They are tomorrow’s faculty.”

— Tammy Than, O.D.
Professor, UABSO