

John Nickerson, PhD, is vice director of vision research for Emory Eye Center. He studies retinal degenerations and the genetics behind them, along with pharmacological or gene therapy approaches to slowing or preventing degeneration.

how gene therapy, circadian rhythms, and cell repair can help pinpoint or stop AMD in its early stages.

Whether they're delving into AMD and other retinal diseases, corneal issues, glaucoma, or other conditions, the researchers know their work can impact generations.

"There are so many different forms of blindness or visual impairment, and many of the treatments are limited," Nickerson says. "We may never say we've found the best treatment possible, but we can use what resources and capabilities we have to move in that direction."

"I never imagined we would reach this point of discovery during my lifetime," Geisert adds. "Things we've learned in the lab are moving toward being applied in clinical situations. It's an exciting time for us and the people we want to help." 

2016

EEC researchers receive \$3 million, five-year NEI Core Grant for Vision Research; this grant has been continuously funded since 1986

2018

EEC publishes research showing connection between central corneal thickness and glaucoma risk



From humble roots to world-renowned

Emory Eye Center's research department began in a simple stone house on the Emory campus with a scientist who became interested in blindness because a class filled a gap in his high school schedule.

The man is Morton Waitzman, PhD. The class was an elective designed to provide rehabilitation services for visually impaired students.

"It was my junior year, and I needed one more class to fill my schedule," Waitzman says. "I started out reading to blind students but soon became enmeshed in anything that might help them."

Waitzman learned to read and write Braille and to use a Braille typewriter. He became assistant Scout master for a Boy Scout troop of visually impaired students and later learned to help train seeing eye dogs.

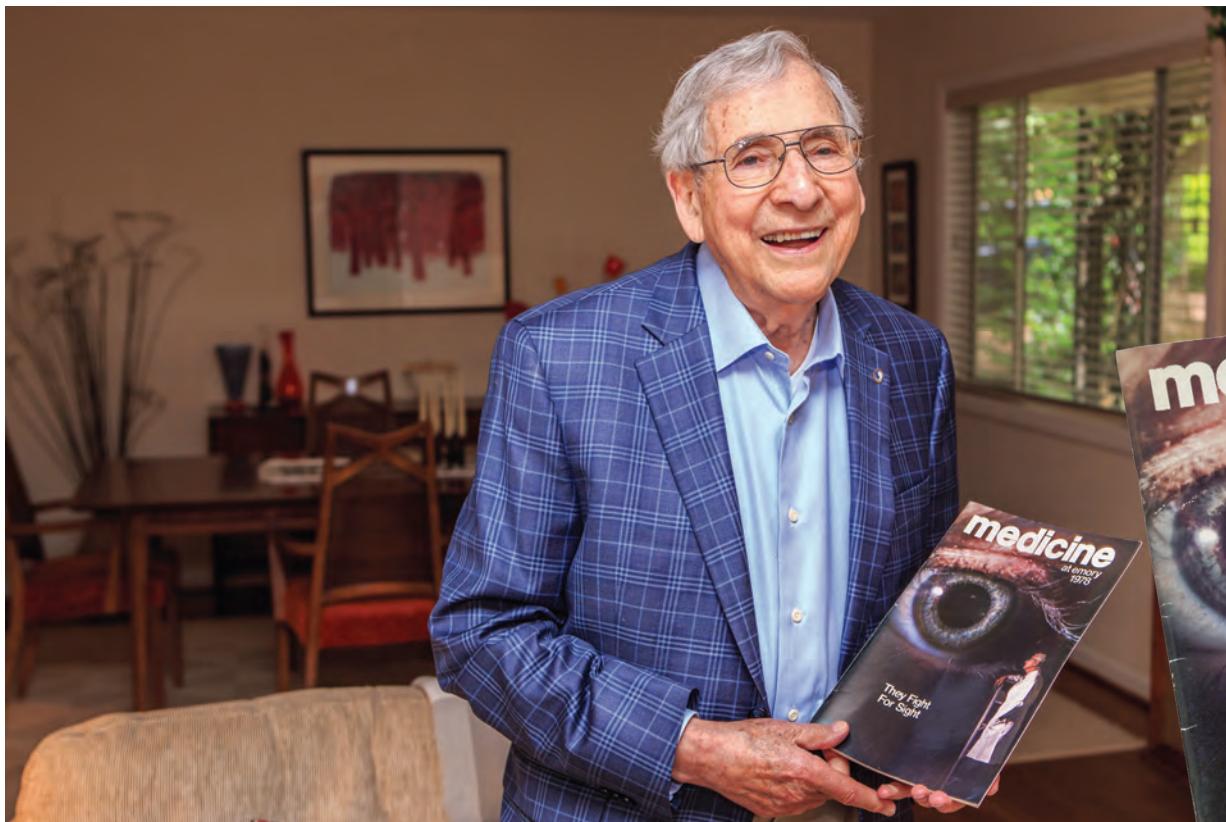
"Helping those people became the most important thing in my life," he says. "I knew that I wanted to become involved with research and solve all the problems of blindness."

Serving in the Army during World War II, landing on the beaches of Normandy on D Day, and fighting his way across Europe postponed Waitzman's future work, but didn't make him stray from his goal.

"One thing kept me going during the war," he says. "I was going to school and was going to do a wonderful thing for the blind people of the world. I had to survive and go to school."

He did, attending college on the GI Bill. He followed with graduate school at the University of Illinois, where he earned his PhD in physiology with minors in nutrition and biochemistry.

"I knew that if I wanted to conduct research related to blindness, I needed to know the basics



Far left: Morton Waitzman, PhD, when he came to Emory in 1962.

Left: Waitzman in his home today. He keeps in touch with Emory Eye Center faculty and is still interested in the department's programs and research.

of biochemistry and physiology. That's why I started there."

Waitzman was a professor and director of ophthalmology research at Case-Western Reserve University when he was contacted about a new opportunity at Emory. F. Phinizy Calhoun, Jr., MD, chairman of ophthalmology at Emory, had gotten approval to begin an ophthalmology research program. When Gerhard Brecher, chairman of Emory's physiology department, learned of the plan, he knew Waitzman would be perfect for the job.

"I was professional friends with Dr. Brecher because of my work in physiology," Waitzman says. "He recommended me for the position. Emory offered me the opportunity to develop a program of research for ophthalmology and hold tenured academic appointments in both ophthalmology and physiology. My family and I agreed this would be the right place for me at that stage in my career."

Waitzman joined Emory in June 1962.

"We faced the challenge of starting at the very beginning—including where the department would be housed," he says. Calhoun and Arthur Richardson, MD, dean of the School of Medicine, described three possible locations to Waitzman. He chose a solid granite building that he knew had space for

“Even in those early days, we were conducting pioneering vision research,” he says. “Our first research studying prostaglandins of the eye was done at the Stone House. We expanded to various disciplines and studied glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, cataracts, and cornea transplants. We made a mark.”

everything they would need for biological research.

Work to transform the Stone House, as it was called, to a research facility began soon after Waitzman arrived in Atlanta. Waitzman also helped recruit scientists to build the research team.

"Even in those early days, we were conducting pioneering vision research," he says. "Our first research studying prostaglandins of the eye was done at the Stone House. We expanded to various disciplines and studied glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, cataracts, cornea transplants. We made a mark."

Waitzman made another mark as the ophthalmology department expanded and received funding for a new building. He helped design what became Clinic B on the Emory University campus.

Even after retiring from Emory in 1991, Waitzman spent years still serving the ophthalmology department at Grady Hospital in numerous capacities.

As he reflects on all he and other vision researchers have done, Waitzman is content. "I derive great satisfaction in knowing that during my career I have contributed to the advancement in treatments of various eye diseases." 