

Taking Aim at Birdshot Chorioretinitis

As head of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission's Division of Corporation Finance, Meredith Cross helped the country navigate its way out of one of the most serious recessions in recent history. It was a dream job for the hard-charging corporate finance lawyer.

Then, on a March morning in 2012, she began to experience vision problems.

"Suddenly I had all of these crazy floaters," recalls Cross.

She told herself to remain calm and go to work, but a few hours later, there was more debris in her vision. Days passed, and doctors could not figure out what was wrong. Meanwhile, Cross' vision continued to deteriorate.

"It felt like I was looking through an Etch A Sketch or Magna Doodle," says Cross. "I was so frightened and frustrated that no one seemed to be able to help me."

Cross' primary care doctor recommended she visit the Wilmer Eye Institute, where **Jennifer Thorne, MD, PhD**, diagnosed her with birdshot chorioretinitis (BSCR)—a very rare type of non-infectious uveitis in which the inside of the eye becomes inflamed. Patients may also experience episodes of macular edema in which blood vessels within part of the retina leak. The disease earned its unusual

name because of the scattered spots that can develop on the retina—spots that resemble birdshot from a shotgun.

"The symptoms tend to come on in a very insidious way," says Thorne, one of the world's few experts on the disease, which usually strikes people in their 40s and 50s, and more often affects women. "Typically there is no pain and the eye is not red."

Thorne has been instrumental in showing the importance of immunosuppressive drugs in combatting BSCR and has worked closely with Cross to fine-tune her medications so that she retains her vision and is able to continue her work. Cross is now a partner at the WilmerHale law firm in Washington, D.C.

Unfortunately, little is known about the causes and progression of BSCR. Cross is hoping to change that with a \$1.25 million financial commitment that has established the Jennifer E. Thorne, MD, PhD, Birdshot Research and Endowed Research Funds. The funds are allowing Thorne to conduct in-depth studies on the epidemiology, progression, and treatment of BSCR, as well as its genetic and epigenetic characterization.

With the funding, Thorne has been able to hire Trucian Ostheimer, MD, a uveitis specialist and research fellow, to assist in her studies. Thorne is currently completing a retrospective analysis of

clinical outcomes of BSCR patients at different academic centers, and she is now participating in a multicenter study to determine the best imaging methods for monitoring the disease. With other collaborators across the country, she also plans to investigate BSCR's immunologic triggers.

By providing financial support for research, Cross feels like she's doing what she can to take charge of her illness and help BSCR patients retain their vision, particularly since funding for birdshot research is so scarce. She has also rallied other donors to put additional funds toward BSCR research—nearly \$150,000 so far, from about 50 donors.

"I'm so grateful to Dr. Thorne for her remarkable care and for undertaking these research projects, and to my friends and family who've already given generously to support the Birdshot funds. Their giving makes so much more possible in the future. And, I can't possibly thank my husband, John, and our son, Joseph, enough for their unwavering support. I feel like I'm a very lucky person."

If you would like to contribute to the Birdshot Research Funds, please visit wilmer.org and designate your gift to the "Birdshot Research Fund" in the dropdown or call the Wilmer Development Office at 410.955.2020. ■

—Sarah Richards

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—Meredith Cross (right), with Thorne

