A Top Priority for Mary
Mary tirelessly worked to raise awareness about T1D after she was diagnosed in 1970 at age 33. As the International Chairman of JDRF from 1984 until her passing in 2017, the beloved actress became a face for T1D and was an advocate for T1D research and a friend to JDRF.

This audacious and worthy goal honors Mary’s deep commitment and concern for the well-being of individuals and families affected by T1D and its complications.

JDRF PARTNERING WITH THE MARY TYLER MOORE & S. ROBERT LEVINE, MD CHARITABLE FOUNDATION
Research “moonshot” aims to restore vision in people with T1D

Actress Mary Tyler Moore was beloved for the iconic characters she played on the television sitcoms The Dick Van Dyke Show and The Mary Tyler Moore Show. But to many with type 1 diabetes (T1D), her greatest role was as an advocate for T1D research and a friend to JDRF.

Now Mary’s legacy is inspiring an ambitious new initiative aimed at restoring vision in people with significant vision loss due to T1D and transforming the scientific understanding of diabetes-related eye disease.

JDRF and The Mary Tyler Moore & S. Robert Levine, MD Charitable Foundation have begun the Restoring Vision: A JDRF Moonshot Initiative, which brings together more than 50 global experts in diabetes-related eye diseases and other disciplines—a team that will advance a research plan resulting in the development of treatments that can reverse the blindness and low vision that results from T1D.

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Mary tirelessly worked to raise awareness about T1D after she was diagnosed in 1970 at age 33. As the International Chairman of JDRF from 1984 until her passing in 2017, the beloved actress became a face for T1D and helped raise billions of dollars for research toward removing the impact of the disease from people’s lives.

Meanwhile, like millions, Mary developed T1D-related vision loss and underwent laser therapy, one of the few treatment options currently available. However, laser therapy can burn or destroy part of the retina and result in impaired peripheral, night and color vision—a complication that Mary herself experienced.

Among the range of complications from T1D that Mary faced over her lifetime,
Twenty-three years ago, Ellen Leake could not have imagined that one day she would become Chair of the JDRF International Board of Directors (IBOD). In 1994, Ellen took her daughter, Elizabeth, then age 10, to the pediatrician for what she expected was a minor ailment. Instead, she learned Elizabeth had type 1 diabetes (T1D).

In the days that followed, Ellen and her husband, Eason, grappled with how the disease would impact their family, including their older daughter, Blair.

Without a cure for T1D visual loss and blindness, millions of people worldwide will continue to suffer life-limiting vision loss and blindness from diabetes-related eye disease. But with Mary Tyler Moore’s legacy inspiring and driving JDRF and innovative scientists working through this initiative, we can continue working toward a world without T1D, while taking the first steps to cure one of the disease’s most common and devastating effects.

We hope you are as excited as we are about this new initiative! Learn more by returning the enclosed reply card.

“We had the same reckoning all parents have — that life is about to change. But we had to make the turn and adjust to the new normal,” says Ellen, who currently leads a family timber and land development business in Mississippi, having previously worked as an executive with IBM.

A pivotal moment occurred in 1998, when together with other parents, Ellen and Eason helped found the JDRF Mississippi Chapter. Ellen has held numerous volunteer roles with JDRF since, becoming board chair on July 1. Today she’s inspired by how JDRF was founded in 1970 by two mothers, sitting at a kitchen table.

“I look back at how they set out on this course to make a difference for their families,” Ellen says. “I come to this role humbled by the disease but also absolutely focused on moving the needle, accelerating progress. As Jeff Plumer and I step into our roles as IBOD vice-chair and chair respectively, we bring dual perspectives: he, as an adult who lives with the disease, and I, as a parent.”

Ellen now has added a perspective as a grandparent. Last February, Elizabeth gave birth to her first child, after wearing a continuous glucose monitor (CGM) during her pregnancy. The JDRF-funded CONCEPTT trial has shown that monitoring blood sugar during pregnancy with a CGM leads to significantly better outcomes for T1D mothers and their babies.

As she met her new granddaughter, Lily, Ellen recalled watching Elizabeth, years ago, work up the courage to give herself an insulin injection for the first time.

“I said to her, ‘If you can do your part, I will do mine.’ I had no idea what that would mean, but as I held Lily, I felt in a very small way that I was delivering on that promise. My hope is that one day, Lily will know that her mother had T1D but that it will not be part of their lives in years to come.”

As part of the same promise, the Leakes are longtime members of the BETA Society.

“It was an easy decision to include JDRF in our estate planning,” Ellen says. “JDRF has research that is taking longer than it should because we don’t have adequate funds to accelerate many projects. Legacy gifts help realize our goal to support people with T1D across all stages of life as we move more quickly and closer to a cure.”