

# walker kirby

By Emma Wells



We are deeply saddened by the loss of Walker Kirby, a patient, friend and generous donor of the Scheie Eye Institute for many years. She passed away on November 11, 2017, at the age of 93.

“Through my seven years as Chairman I came to know Walker well,” said Joan O’Brien, MD. “Walker loved back porches, the beautiful trees her husband cherished, and the summers and holidays spent with her loving family. Over the years, I learned very much about the family she cared for so deeply. I will miss her very much, as she had become a dear friend.”

Walker grew up in Greensboro, North Carolina. In 1949, she married Fred Morgan Kirby II, who was the former chairman and CEO of Alleghany Corporation, as well as the president of the F.M. Kirby Foundation. When Fred passed away in 2011, Walker told Dr. O’Brien she would never stop missing her late husband, but “that was the price she willingly paid for such a happy marriage.”

Walker and Fred had four children, ten grandchildren, and eight great-grandchildren, all of whom they loved beyond measure. “It was an honor and a pleasure to care for Walker Kirby,” said Joshua L. Dunaief, MD, PhD. “She would always tell me about the meaningful pursuits of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She loved them, and felt deeply loved and cared for by them.”

Walker will be remembered for her limitless kindness and generosity. She devoted her life to philanthropic work, and her contributions to Ophthalmology at Penn were many.

Walker served as a board member of the F.M. Kirby Foundation for over 30 years, a family foundation established in 1931 by her grandfather-in-law. Penn’s F.M. Kirby Center for Molecular Ophthalmology was founded in 1994 with a generous gift from the F.M. Kirby Foundation, which has continued to provide consistent support to the center for nearly 25 years. This support has been instrumental in several high-impact research advances.

In 2015, Scheie Eye Institute established the Walker D. Kirby Ophthalmology Medical Student Award. This award is given every year, in perpetuity, to a medical student graduating from the Perelman School of Medicine who plans to pursue ophthalmology and who embodies Walker’s core values of respect, loyalty, perseverance, empathy, responsibility, and honesty. “She was so thoughtful to meet with the student who received the award and best embodied Walker’s values,” said

Prithvi Sankar, MD, the Director of Medical Student Education at the Department of Ophthalmology. “Her kindness and generosity were so admirable and will continue to live on with all her efforts.”

Also extraordinary was Walker’s devotion to The Seeing Eye, a philanthropic organization in Morristown, NJ, that trains guide dogs for people with visual impairments, where Walker sat on the board for 30 years. Walker initiated a program at Seeing Eye called Walkie’s Walkers, which organizes play and exercise breaks for puppies undergoing rigorous training. In 1991, The Seeing Eye awarded her the Dorothy Harrison Eustis Humanitarian Award.

Equally remarkable as her life-changing philanthropic work were the small kindnesses that Walker extended to everyone she met. Dr. Dunaief keenly remembered Walker’s thoughtful gestures. “During her visits, she would always inquire about our latest research on retinal disease. Without fail, she would bring a gold bag of peanuts from North Carolina—the best my colleagues and I have ever tasted!” added Dr. Dunaief. “I will miss her, and the memory of this warm, altruistic, dignified woman will continue to serve as an inspiration.”

Dr. O’Brien concurred: “For many years we shared lunch together, and she always brought me a thoughtful gift when she visited. Walker will never be forgotten by me, the Scheie Eye Institute, and the medical students who carry her values forward to care for others as Walker always did. I too will try my very best to exemplify the values she taught me.” 🌞