ALUMNA SPOTLIGHT

Ensuring Smiles & More

HOW **SHIRA LIPTON '97** AND CONGRESSWOMAN **ANNA ESHOO** ARE TEAMING UP FOR KIDS WITH CONGENITAL ANOMALIES

It was a simple message: "If you believe in something, you just go for it. You fight for it until people start to listen." Congresswoman Anna Eshoo delivered these words at Shira Lipton's Commencement in 1997, unaware of the impact she'd have on Shira's future.

Twenty-three years later, Shira was sitting in a rocking chair, staring at her newborn baby, Rosie, and suddenly noticed something was not right.

"I thought there was a glare from the window light casting some sort of shadow on her eye. I kept looking and looking and thinking that pupil isn't normal; it's off-center and misshapen."

At two weeks old, Rosie was diagnosed with a series of congenital anomalies of her left eye, including a congenital cataract. At six weeks old, Rosie underwent surgery to remove the cataract. The day after her surgery, she was fitted for her first infant contact lens, which needed to be inserted every morning and removed every evening. Infant contact lenses are changed often, as the baby's eye grows and vision develops, and they fall out easily. "We just couldn't get the contacts in and out. We were at Stanford every morning and every night for about a month getting help from the infant optometrist and ophthalmologist."

Without these medically-necessary lenses, Rosie, and other children with congenital cataracts, are unable to develop normal vision; in fact, the outcome can be blindness. By the time Rosie was eleven months old, the cost of her lenses (at $200 a piece) exceeded $4,000. Shira was stunned to learn that insurance does not cover the expense. She knew that the stress other families like hers were going through simply wasn't acceptable. Something had to be done.

Determined to help these children and their families, Shira began calling, emailing, and writing letters to Congresswoman Anna Eshoo (CA-18), who is the chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Health. After reaching a senior health policy advisor, Shira discovered that an existing bill, the **Ensuring Lasting Smiles Act (ELSA)**, covered the topic of congenital anomalies, but did not include vision. With Shira's permission, Congresswoman Eshoo shared Rosie's story on the day the bill was being debated, arguing: Why limit the bill to only one part of the body? If a child has a congenital anomaly of any kind, they need and deserve care.

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Shira credits the lessons of tenacity she learned at Castilleja for propelling her to act on her daughter's, and other children's, behalf. "From the day I started Castilleja until my graduation, the legacies of activism and optimism live on." Working as a full-time dermatologist and mother of two other daughters, Shira was nonetheless adamant about advocating for these infants. "I knew in my heart that if the congresswoman understood what this meant, she would act on it." Indeed, Shira's instincts were correct; due to her advocacy, Congresswoman Eshoo decided to be the Democratic sponsor of the Ensuring Lasting Smiles Act for the 117th Congress. According to the Congresswoman's senior health policy advisor, "it will be a major priority for [Eshoo] to pass this bill."

While the future of Rosie's vision is unknown and unlikely to be perfect, Shira shared: "If she can recognize a smile or a wave, we would feel that we've made it to the moon."