

College of Optometry Alumni, Students, and Faculty Participate in National
Keratoconus Foundation-Sponsored Event Featuring St. Louis Cardinals
Outfielder Tommy Pham



On Monday evening, September 11th, Cardinals outfielder Tommy Pham was the featured speaker at a local event for individuals with keratoconus and their referring doctors. This included members of the MD-OD Contact Lens Foundation of St. Louis, as well as Dr. Julie DeKinder, Director of Academic and Residency Programs, and Dr. Jean Bennett. Tommy provided a very inspiring story of how he struggled in the minor leagues until Cardinals official (at that time) Jeff Luhnow recommended that he have his eyes examined. He was then diagnosed with keratoconus, and not long afterwards he became one of the first athletes to have corneal crosslinking performed.

Although it took six more years for him to have a breakout year with the Cardinals (due primarily to injuries), he has persevered with a condition that would normally make professional baseball an impossible dream. Tommy told everyone how determination, a good mental approach, and a very strong work ethic have allowed him to achieve his dreams and can do likewise for anyone with this sight-compromising eye disease.

The Master of Ceremonies of the event was Assistant Dean Ed Bennett, who had an expert panel to answer questions from the audience. The panel included Cardinals team eye doctor Adam Fedyk, MD, Carmen Castellano, OD, and David Seibel, OD ('87). Dr. Seibel, who has served as the team eye doctor for the St. Louis Rams and currently for the St. Louis Blues, was very impressed: "Having worked with professional athletes for over 30 years, it is very rare that I find an active player in any sport who will disclose information that may be perceived as a potential weakness in their performance. Tommy Pham is one of those rare professional athletes who not only discusses his visual complications with keratoconus, but champions the cause by raising public awareness.

Tommy's story will inspire many young people dealing with visual impairment to overcome their visual challenges in athletics and in life." Sean Mulqueeny, OD ('91), President of the MD-OD Contact Lens Foundation of St. Louis agreed: "This evening in Saint Louis was very special! We are fortunate to have an incredible spokesman in Tommy Pham. What he has been able to achieve in spite of his condition is nothing short of exceptional! I was impressed with Tommy's humility and his commitment

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to getting the word out about contact lens and surgical alternatives for all that have the disease. Tommy showed what it takes to excel and that you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it."

Several students served as monitors for this event. They were glad they came, as Justin Kendall ('20) relates: "... it was very inspiring to hear Tommy Pham's story and all of the struggles that he has overcome in his lifetime ... He is incredibly determined to be the best baseball player he can be, regardless of any setbacks he may encounter with keratoconus." George Dowdy ('20) agrees: "It was amazing to hear Tommy's story and how he kept pushing to put himself in the right opportunity to improve his vision. It is cool to see him as a role model and success story for patients that are newly diagnosed with keratoconus or other eye diseases." And it is becoming evident that Tommy Pham is rapidly becoming the national spokesperson for this condition as Erik Peyton ('20) conveys: "The event was so cool: getting to see so many people who struggle with keratoconus getting to meet the guy that is putting the disease on the map. So many people got to meet their hero, and hopefully his testimony can give them hope as they go through their personal struggles."

Numerous individuals representing the St. Louis Cardinals, including coaches and media, attended the event, as did radio personality and part-time Cardinals radio broadcaster Mike Claiborne. Executive Director of the National Keratoconus Foundation (NKCF), Mary Prudden, presented Tommy with the NKCF Ambassador Award, a very deserving tribute to perhaps the Cardinals' most valuable player in 2017. He was truly humbled by the award. The evening session was preceded by the filming of several educational videos at Busch Stadium – again sponsored by the NKCF – with Dr. Bennett interviewing Tommy about his history with keratoconus and how he has overcome it.