
Irving Fradkin (1921-2016), Practicing Optometrist and Founder of Scholarship America

Russell Fradkin, O.D.
999 Providence Road, Whitinsville, MA 01588
russ.jane12@gmail.com

Irving Fradkin was born in 1921 in Chelsea, Massachusetts. He was the youngest of seven children of Jewish immigrants, his father from Russia and his mother from Poland.¹ He had thoughts of becoming a baker, but his experience getting glasses led him to decide to become an optometrist. He worked his way through school at his father's bakery, graduating from Massachusetts College of Optometry (now the New England College of Optometry) in 1943.

After graduation, Fradkin set up practice in Fall River, Massachusetts, a working class mill town. He acknowledged that he was blessed to be living in the United States and he wanted somehow to give something back. Having a strong belief in the importance of education and knowing that many of his young patients did not attend college due to financial constraints, he decided to do something about it. He ran for the Fall River school committee in the 1950s on a platform of community support for college scholarships for local students. He lost the election but decided to start a program anyway.

Fradkin founded Citizens Scholarship Foundation, better known as Dollars for Scholars, in 1958. He had the idea that if everyone in their community gave one dollar, enough money would be available for worthy students to get a college education. Fradkin always thought big. Starting his program, he called President Eisenhower's White House collect. Eleanor Roosevelt happened to be visiting the oval office at the time, took the call, accepted the charges, and made the first one dollar donation. The comedian Sam Levenson was the first honorary spokesman for the scholarship program and called Fradkin "an optometrist with vision."

In the first year, Fradkin and community volunteers raised \$4,500 to give scholarships to 24 high school students from Fall River and the surrounding area. Fradkin ran Citizens Scholarship Foundation for many years. A few years ago the name of the organization was changed to Scholarship America. Today Scholarship America is a non-profit organization with thousands of volunteers. Since its beginning in the 1950s, it has provided 3.5 billion dollars in scholarships to over 2.2 million students.²

Before his death in 2016, Fradkin received many recognitions and awards for his contributions to society. He was a finalist for the Congressional Medal of Honor Foundation Citizens Before Self award. He was Optometrist of the Year of the Massachusetts College



of Optometry Alumni Association (1965), and he received honorary degrees from New England College of Optometry (2008) and Stonehill College (2014).³⁻⁵ Fradkin's work sometimes had surprising benefits. The supervisor of the emergency room where he received care after a 1988 heart attack comforted him, telling him that she had been able to attend nursing school because of his program.¹

References

1. Roberts S. Irving Fradkin, founder of Dollars for Scholars program, dies at 95. New York Times. www.nytimes.com, Dec. 2, 2016. Accessed Jan. 5, 2017.
2. Letter from Robert C. Ballard, President and CEO of Scholarship America to Jasiel F. Correia II, Mayor of Fall River, Massachusetts, August 16, 2016.
3. Directory of the American Optometric Association. St. Louis: American Optometric Association, 1972:107.
4. Dr. Irving Fradkin, OD '43, Founder of Dollars for Scholars, dies at age 95. New England College of Optometry, Dec. 9, 2016. www.neco.edu. Accessed Feb. 2, 2017.
5. Remembering Dr. Fradkin. The Herald News of Fall River, Nov. 22, 2016. www.heraldnews.com. Accessed Feb. 2, 2017.