Success in sight for eye campaign mother whose fund-raising could save thousands

WHAT started with a coffee morning to help her son’s eyesight has blossomed into a multi-million pound research project which could save thousands from blindness.

By [LUCY JOHNSTON, EXCLUSIVE](http://www.express.co.uk/search/Lucy+Johnston%252C+Exclusive?s=Lucy+Johnston%2C+Exclusive&b=1)

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When Emma Salisbury, 44, a mother of three from Welling, Kent, was told four-year old son Tommy had choroideremia, she was devastated.

Mrs Salisbury, a marketing assistant, knew the effect of the condition because it made her grandfather blind by middle age. So with her mother Dot she set about raising funds for a cure, hosting up to four events a year and making more than £480,000.

This paid for research which, with further grants, led to a successful trial of the world’s first treatment, 11 years after Tommy was diagnosed.

University of Oxford scientists last week published trial results in the New England Journal of Medicine showing patients treated with the therapy – injecting a virus in the eye to deliver healthy genes to replace a missing gene – had vision restored for as long as four years.

The team hopes their technique will not only save the sight of Tommy, now 16, but could also lead to cures for common causes of blindness including macular degeneration and retinitis pigmentosa.

They say this would not have been achieved without Mrs Salisbury. When her son was diagnosed in 2005 she contacted a scientist at Imperial College in London who was hoping to develop a cure and went to visit him with her husband Paul.

“We came out of that meeting with hope,” said Mrs Salisbury. “We were told this was a disease that could be treated but funding was needed.”

Through the charity Fight for Sight, the family began fund raising. Their first coffee morning with 100 women raised £6,000 in two hours. Cake sales, golf days, mud runs, bike rides, marathons, school discos and fun runs followed.

“I always have a huge pile of ironing and housework is not a priority. I now run most of my friends’ social lives with all the events,” said Mrs Salisbury.

The money raised led to research results which generated funds from the Wellcome Trust and its partners, NightStaRx, the Evergreen Fund and venture capital firm New Enterprise Associates.

Since her efforts began almost £40 million has gone into the research. Choroideremia affects one in 50,000 males, destroying retina cells.

The research shows the effects of the treatment could be permanent. More trials are planned.

Robert MacLaren, professor of ophthalmology at the University of Oxford, who is leading the two-year trial, said: “This research shows real promise for the first time and I am very excited by it. The technique could apply to other eye diseases and it has huge potential to open the door to prevent sight loss or improve vision to thousands of people.

“It would not have been possible without Emma’s fund raising.”

Tommy, whose vision will deteriorate if untreated, is hoping to have the therapy when it is licensed.

Teacher Joe Pepper, 24, from Croydon, said: “I sat down and began the reading chart test on my treated right eye and read the first two lines and for the first time in my memory I read on and on.”