

On Milestones and Mentors

By the time you read this, I should have just celebrated my sixtieth birthday. Sixty. The BIG SIX-ZERO! WOW! While I can still recall when thirty was “old,” I must admit I simply do not feel sixty. Yes, I do have the occasional aches and pains, I probably cannot perform manual labor for long stretches of time as I could in my twenties, I cannot stay out and party all night, or pull “all-nighters” studying (thank goodness I no longer have to!), and I do find that it takes me a bit longer to complete tasks than it once did. As the country western song goes, “I’m not as good as I once was.” But, knock wood, thus far I’ve managed to stay healthy, gainfully employed, and active. And, like many of my colleagues, when the economy took a nosedive two years ago, those dreams of retirement that once were a progressively brightening light have now faded to a mere glimmer. Looking at forced Medicare in a few years, always wondering if I have made sufficient contingency plans to protect my beautiful wife, our five kids, and six grandkids if something unforeseen happens, having two more kids to eventually pay for weddings, and one to get out of college (he’s contemplating law school now), I realize now why I stay so darned busy. . . BECAUSE I CAN, and BECAUSE I ENJOY IT, and no, not because I have to (well, maybe a little)!

Looking back over my sixty years (it’s even tough to type sixty, much less contemplate it), I do realize how fortunate I have been in my life and my career. Growing up in a loving and supportive family, getting a great education in North Carolina schools and universities, six years in the NC National Guard, finally finding my soul mate who truly is the love of my life, raising wonderful children and now grandchildren, and having the opportunity to teach future dentists and Prosthodontists and conduct meaningful research at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry—all of these have helped to define my life. But there have been others.

I joined the American College of Prosthodontists in 1982 as a student member, and was asked to serve on my first committee (the now defunct “Color and Color Matching Committee”) upon my graduation in 1984. I was invited to attend my very first ACP Board of Directors meeting in 1987, when Dr. Cosmo De Steno was president of the College. I clearly recall being in awe of the legends of Prosthodontics in attendance at the Board meeting. Those legends on whose articles I had just spent much of my residency reading: Drs. Noel Wilkie, Jack Preston, Bill Kuebker, Steve Bergen, John Holmes, Jim Fowler, Ken Turner, Ken Rudd, Ken Stewart, and others. And here I was, a mere nobody from North Carolina, sitting in a room and being asked to help shape the future of the ACP. I must admit, it was overwhelming; however, I also recall how warm, supportive, and giving this group was toward me. They became my mentors and were instrumental in shaping my career in service to the ACP and the Specialty on both the national and international

levels. Sure, there were the turf wars, the heated disagreements, and the incredible controversies (like the dissolution of the FPO, and the initiation of our very own *Journal of Prosthodontics*), but at the end of the day, these giants of our Specialty had one common goal—moving the ACP and the Specialty and Discipline of Prosthodontics forward. And, at the end of the day, these legends not only became colleagues, they became close friends. In the 22 years since 1987, I have been “off” of the ACP Board of Directors for approximately one year, when the Board was restructured and downsized in the late 1990s. During my nearly 22 years of service on the Board, I have noticed one common denominator—while the faces (and personalities) change, the common goal of moving the College forward has not. I feel incredibly fortunate to have been a part of the ACP, and the Board of Directors; the friendships I have made are lasting, and some of the strongest I have. I look forward to fostering those relationships over the next several decades.

I do not define my career in Prosthodontics as serving the ACP as an officer, as one of its Presidents, or even as the Editor of the *Journal of Prosthodontics*. While these are all very important milestones in my life, perhaps the greatest gift I have received from my years of active participation in the College has been the accumulated knowledge, wisdom, and insight of those 22 years of working closely with the legends of Prosthodontics—each has mentored me in some fashion, and enabled me to become a better mentor to others, a task I do not take lightly. If you want to make a difference in someone’s life, perhaps it is not about your skill level as a Prosthodontist—perhaps it is about your skill at being a mentor to others. I have had some great mentors in my life and my career, I know of many other great mentors, and I hope to ultimately become a great mentor—that would truly define my life and my service to others.

So, here’s my challenge to each of you—I challenge you to identify a predoctoral dental student, or a Graduate Prosthodontics Resident, or a young Prosthodontist in your area, and to share your years of knowledge and experience with them—be a mentor! Help mould and shape their careers in dentistry and allow them to be the best they can be, and to enjoy Prosthodontics as much as you have. Help direct them toward active participation and service to the College, the Specialty, and the Discipline of Prosthodontics. And, I ask that you raise a glass and join me in celebrating one of the milestones in my life—the big SIX-ZERO, and keep one thing in mind—I am STILL younger than some of you! Cheers!

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