

## AMERICAN PUBLIC HEALTH ASSOCIATION

## The John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health—2003 Recipient: Dushanka V. Kleinman, DDS, MScD

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### Background

It is truly a pleasure to introduce Dr. Dushanka V. Kleinman, our 2003 recipient of the John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health. Dr. Kleinman has distinguished herself in a variety of capacities, which include leading, mentoring, lecturing, consulting, publishing, conducting research, planning, and making policy. She *practices* dental public health. Dushanka has been a contributing member to the oral health section for many, many years. She edited and co-edited the then dental health section newsletter in 1978–80 and she was a member of the Dental Health Section Council from 1983–86. She also served on the Governing Council for two years (1990–92). Further, she was president of the American Association of Public Health Dentistry (AAPHD) in 1998–2000 and has served in many capacities in AAPHD. Dushanka is one of the few women who served as president of the American Board of Dental Public Health.

But, most of you know most of this information. Most of you know Dushanka as a dental public health role model, so what I have done is collect a modest amount of additional information from a wide variety of sources. I want you to know that the content of this presentation, while not necessarily scientific, it is evidence based. And none of it has been cleared by my institute. This information was obtained using a pretested survey instrument. A random sample was not used and the response rate was 98 percent. Whether by personal or phone interview or by e-mail, after providing background information to the informant that Dushanka was the 2003 recipient of the Knutson award, the basic questions were: Can you think of anything that can be used to roast Dushanka? If yes, please explain. If no,

can you think of anything that even slightly roasts Dushanka? If no, can you provide me with any kind of a boo-boo or funny incident that you have shared with Dushanka?

I also interviewed Joel, Dushanka's husband, and her mother, Draga. Draga was very helpful and provided me with many photos and many stories. Invariably when speaking about her daughter, Draga referred to her as MY Dushanka.

Born in Podkoren, Yugoslavia (now Slovenia), Dushanka is the eldest child and only daughter of Dr. Dragoslava (Draga) and the late Dr. Stanley (Stan) Vesselinovitch. She has two brothers, Alexander (Saskia), who is five years younger and was born in Canada, and Andrew, who is 15 years younger and was born in Chicago.

When Dushanka was nearly 3 years of age, she and her family left Yugoslavia to escape Communism. They walked through the Alps at night over the border into Italy. Dushanka was given sleeping pills to keep her quiet and was carried the entire way by her father. Another couple with a young daughter accompanied them. They spent several months in a refugee camp in Naples before being moved to a refugee camp in Bremen, Germany, for about six months. Their plan was to settle in another country. The United States had a quota, so they had three options: Australia, Venezuela, or Canada. There wasn't much of a choice in that Australia was too far away and they spoke no Spanish; thus Canada became their destination.

Her father went in advance to Saskatchewan, where he worked on a farm to earn money to send for Draga and Dushanka. Ultimately, they ended up in Toronto, where her mother earned her degree in veterinary medicine and her father, already a DVM, earned a doctorate in physiology. In 1959 they moved to Chicago,

where her father worked on cancer research at the University of Chicago. He was a 30-year grantee of the National Cancer Institute.

Dushanka skipped a grade and graduated from high school when she was 16. Because she was so young, her mother would not let her date until she was 15. Before her high school prom, Dushanka told her mother, "If I don't have a date for the prom, it is your fault and you will feel guilty when I am all dressed up and have no place to go." She had several invitations to the prom.

In high school, Dushanka liked math, biology, and was fascinated by patterns of tooth eruption. This, she thinks may have initiated her interest in dentistry as a career. However, her brother Alex thinks otherwise; he explained, "My big sister, whom I've always called Duke, has become a highly dignified and eminent lady. It wasn't always that way. She probably endured her most humiliating treatment from me over 40 years ago. I'm convinced that her interest in dentistry began on that summer day, when we were on a family driving vacation in Colorado. While Duke gazed over the vast continental divide during a road stop, I sneaked up behind her, entirely unprovoked, and sunk my teeth into her back as hard as I could. Why did I commit such an atrocious act on my teenage sister? Sibling rivalry? Male hormone imbalance? To this day, I have no clue. It remains one of the mysteries of dental science." He goes on to say, "I'd like to apologize to Duke now, but also take some credit for her relentless rise in the dental profession. It was the sheer power and destructive force of my toothy bite, I'm convinced, that led to Duke's fascination with teeth, and the harm that can come from them. I applaud my big sister Duke for her award, and I promise her in front of all of you that I will

never bite her again!" Perhaps an additional factor that may have played a part in her intent to succeed in dentistry was due to her then boyfriend's family, who intimated that a woman didn't belong in dentistry.

She graduated from the University of Illinois dental school in 1973, where she was one of two women in a class of over 80. Following that, she completed a rotating internship at the University of Chicago, where she met Joel. She had been in touch with Tony Jong at Harvard University and ended up going there for her master's degree in Tony's program at Boston University. Shortly thereafter, she went to the University of Maryland Dental School and worked with Lee Joseph for two years. In 1978 she began her career in the US Public Health Service Corps as a staff dentist in the Division of Dentistry to work with Rudy Micik, also a member of the US Public Health Service.

In 1980, when Dushanka was employed by the Division of Dentistry, Lois Cohen was anxious to recruit an experienced dentist who could help with the planning and evaluation functions at the NIDR. Many applicants were interviewed and the choice was Dushanka. It was one of those "hurry and up and fill the FTE or the vacancy would disappear" situations, Lois recalls. "I called her number, discovered that she was in Bethesda Naval Hospital, and was in the process of giving birth to daughter #1, Alexa. Not being able to wait much longer, I located her room number and telephone at the hospital and called to congratulate her and offer her the position. A weak voice responded to the call, as she was recovering from a C-Section. I let her know that we were happy to learn of her daughter's arrival and though this was not an opportune time for her to respond to a job offer, I plunged right ahead explaining our predicament." Lois has never been sure if Dushanka was in full possession of her faculties at that point, as her weak voice might have suggested otherwise. "I apologized for calling her at that time and rushing her for a quick response. She wanted to discuss it first with Joel," but Lois had her answer the following day. A few weeks later, Dushanka showed up for work with Alexa in a basket and thus began her career at NIH. The NIDR and NIDCR were never quite the same again!

### **The Planner**

Dushanka was hired at the NIDCR to help with planning and evaluation. Little did anyone dream how well suited she was for this position. She is indeed a planner! She plans dinner parties, symposia, research agendas, graduations, vacations, and more. Some people claim that she plans vacations like an army bivouac in that every minute is planned. The scenario goes something like this: Joel is immediately dispatched to the nearest golf course or courses, the balance of the troops are engaged at appointed times for: museums, castles, self-guided tours, theaters, and flea markets. Yes, she has never found a flea market she could resist! Which explains, in part, why some refer to her as the collector.

### **The Collector**

Dushanka is consummate collector. She collects: papers, people, chocolate, papers, rocks, clothes, art work, papers, and artisans, whether they are gourmet cooks, jewelry makers, or painters. You name it; she collects it or them. A few years ago, in an attempt to organize some of her many files, she purchased several huge wicker baskets to house mounds of papers at her office. At one time these baskets were attractively arranged in the hallway leading to her office. However, they soon became filled and overflowing and after a visit from the fire marshal had to be repositioned in her office. When I interviewed Joel Kleinman, he confided that his greatest fear in life is that Dushanka's collection of papers housed on the kitchen counters and table will take over the dining area and he will have no place to sit and eat!

### **The Athlete**

Since her childhood Dushanka has been an avid athlete. Dushanka has walked for various causes for decades. In the early 1980s we walked in a rally for NOW. She was very pregnant and pushed Alexa in a stroller. Later, on a planned vacation, she walked with friend Susie up strenuous hills and down dales—only her hiking boots were too short and she had to walk downhill backwards to keep from hurting her already bleeding toes. To get in shape for this trek, Phil Swango and I spent many lunch hours running her up and down the stairwells in the Westwood Building.

Early this year she convinced sev-

eral of us to participate in the San Diego walk/run marathon, a 26+ mile course. She and Lee Joseph "trained" sporadically for this event, with the idea that if they could just complete half of it they would be doing quite well. They told very few people what they were up to (just in case they didn't cross the finish line). When they reached the halfway point, Dushanka urged them to go on. When they finally got close to the finish line, Dushanka said to Lee, "OK, this is what we're going to do. We're going to run across the finish line with our arms up over our heads—just like the runners." And they did! This was not all torture, however; they stayed in the Coronado Hotel and had a really good massage afterward. Her passion for all kinds of exercise has led her to interesting situations. Once she organized a group of us to go to a Bikram yoga, or "hot yoga," course. This course started out to be an hour long, mind you, at 100-degree temperature taught by a sadomasochist. But the instructor was having so much fun, he gave us an extra 15 minutes. None of us returned for additional lessons.

### **Naked in America**

Joan Wolentz explained that, "I roomed with Dushanka at my first IADR/AADR meeting and, avid athlete as she is, she suggested we take advantage of the hotel pool. Only problem was we didn't bring bathing suits." No problem, we learned, for a small fee we could purchase "disposable" ones. Only too true! On jumping into the pool, we soon discovered that the garments were, shall we say, not of lasting quality ... we blushed as we beat a hasty retreat from our fellow bathers."

### **The Teacher**

Dushanka has always been a teacher/mentor. As a child she took ballet lessons and during the summer she taught younger children ballet at summer camp. A bit later, her younger brother wrote that when he was a child, Dushanka's role seemed to be that of introducing an immigrant family to "brand new" Americanisms. "For example, I remember her bringing in a huge mushroom for my grandmother to prepare for dinner. That mushroom overwhelmed us. Dushanka also introduced us to the avocado, including growing the pit by

sticking toothpicks into it and placing it in a glass of water."

Lee Joseph and Dushanka were known as "Laverne and Shirley" at the University of Maryland Dental School. Once while they were team-teaching an epidemiology course to dental students who were not terribly interested in learning about dmfs and dmft. So, Lee and Dushanka had T-shirts made that they wore under jackets and then flashed the T-shirts with dmft or dmfs—trying to insert a little fun into teaching. Legend has it that this is, in fact, the derivation of the term "flashing."

### **Toys are Dushanka**

Words from her youngest daughter, Jessica, are so fitting: "If my mom acts the same way at work as she does at home, to be honest, I would have to say my mother is superwoman. She does it all. As a mother, she is everything a daughter could ask for. She is always available and I have always known growing up that no matter how busy she was at work she would turn anything away for Alexa or me. I have always been aware of what a hard worker she is, but to be honest I have always thought of her as my mom, not a powerful and important professional. At home, Alexa and I always make fun of her for how goofy and silly she is. As professional and mature as my mom can be, she is truly a child at heart." This observation is so evident because birthdays and celebrations of any sort are always an excuse for her to buy toys and little knick knacks to show her love for whomever it may be. This young woman knows her mom all too well. For example, when the "Oral Health in America: a Report of the Surgeon General" was released, immediately after the ceremony and the Surgeon General was out of sight, she ran to the nearest toy store to purchase toys for everyone who had contributed.

Dushanka has fun. As chief dental officer, she has changed the Commissioned Officers Association meetings. Formerly the meetings were viewed as staid, uncooperative, and boring—but she has made them fun and attendance is UP! She does most anything to make people laugh and lighten up. Steve Corbin noted, "Dushanka is one of the people whom I respect the most and I have enjoyed a very close personal and professional relationship with her

for over 20 years. It is not possible for me to roast her. I thought about this, but I just come up empty. And with my active and irreverent imagination, that is saying a lot."

I knew the first time I met Dushanka that she was special. It was at the NIH back in 1980. I was there with John Leo to present information on fluoridation in the Indian Health Service and the Venturi fluoridator—at that time viewed as the answer to fluoridating small communities around the world. I made a presentation before the council and then John and I went out back behind Building 31, where we set up a Venturi system live, with hoses and all, at the loading dock. It was memorable from two perspectives; we were surrounded by garbage cans and trash—not a very inviting scene. And very few people stopped by. But Dushanka did come by, stayed, and asked some excellent questions. She was genuinely interested. I didn't know who she was, since I had never seen her before, but I knew she was special. Quite frankly—and off the record—at that tender age, I had not experienced women being beautiful, friendly, classy, and intelligent all at the same time. It had to be some kind of trick. But of course I would find out by the test of time that she was exactly what she appeared to be. Dushanka was a fantastic colleague and always had amazing insights. She committed herself to details and she always improved everything that she touched.

I would be remiss not to mention the very special times that we spent together as part of the Fluorite Five, which also included Linda Niessen, Skip Collins, and Bill Maas. What an amazing experience. Looking back, I think we were kind of like the Brat Pack in "St. Elmo's Fire." We helped and pushed each other to learn things we would have never achieved as individuals. The buddies were there for each other and Dushanka was also the mom, which of course we know she always has been.

In the broadest sense, Dushanka is one of the most caring people I have ever encountered. Rarely would she say a bad word about anybody—even those who had well earned it. There has always been a warm countenance, keen intellect, and passionate commitment to public health, truth, and people.

Skip Collins wrote: "Public health is

about attaining and using knowledge for the improvement of human health. Electricity without a grid does humans little good. In similar fashion, public health knowledge without 'connections'—a grid of human partnerships if you will—isn't very effective either." I can think of no one person who nurtures such connections better than Dushanka. No matter how busy she is—and we all know how many hats she wears—she seems to find time for us all and make us all feel important. And you know what she would say to that—'Well, it's because you are [important].' In turn, I believe we work that much harder in pursuit of public health." Dushanka—thanks for founding and leading the Fluorite 5 in 1984 and for continuing over the ensuing years to be a splendid mentor and stellar model in so many ways to so many people. Dental public health and its workers are so much the better for your efforts!"

Hal Slavkin noted, "From July 1995 to July 2000, Dushanka and I learned and worked closely together on literally thousands of issues involving leadership, strategic planning, health policy, research programs coupled with the first-time-ever Surgeon Generals' Report 'Oral Health in America,' approaches to reduce oral health disparities, and the extraordinary 'burst' of scientific and technological research opportunities that reconnect the craniofacial-oral-dental complex (the mouth) with the rest of the body. Throughout that era of NIH and federal government history, we sensed and we knew and we learned how public health really makes a difference in the lives of so many millions of people in America and beyond. We also learned to laugh during draconian events.

"For example, soon after arriving at the NIH to join Harold Varmus' leadership team in July 1995, I made a number of 'Hill visits' choreographed by Dushanka and her team. The visits focused on congressional members, especially those working on appropriations for DHHS. In the course of these visits, several congressional leaders shared with me their concerns over negotiations with then President Bill Clinton and his staff, and they clearly stated their desire to shut down the government. Of course, I'm a Californian from Los Angeles and familiar with earthquakes, riots, and most re-

cently 'recall elections.' After hearing these 'warnings,' I returned to Bethesda and related my stories to Dushanka, who smiled and assured me that this was likely posturing and maybe Congress could symbolically close the government over a weekend. This radiant confidence was also projected by other experienced NIH leaders. Time passed quickly, but I kept hearing these rumblings from select congressional leadership. However, based upon Dushanka's wisdom, my wife Lois and I invited our family (children and grandchildren) to visit us in Washington, DC, just before Thanksgiving. We arranged for visits/passes to the White House, Senate dining room, museums, the Kennedy Center, etc., for mid-November 1995. Our family arrived eager to see us and to savor our nation's capitol. Yes, the government closed, and Dushanka, planner that she is, immediately provided me with wonderful things to do and places to see in Baltimore. After that first government-wide 'shutdown,' Dushanka and I spent a great deal of time planning for the future during the second historical shutdown of mid-December 1995. The January blizzard of 1996 followed this. Through this 'welcome to federal government,' and so much more, I learned a great deal about Dushanka Kleinman—she is a truly remarkable human being, a fantastic mentor and coach, a champion for doing the right thing, and a highly skilled health policy talent with unlimited energy and passion. She is a talented and devoted wife, mother, and daughter and the best friend in the world."

Pat Grady, a friend and deputy director of another NIH institute said, "I have been impressed by her dedication to quality in all things. Her attention to detail and level of commitment, whether on projects at work or at

home is unceasingly impressive. She personifies the line misquoted from Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* character who 'accomplishes six difficult things before breakfast.'"

So what is it like being part of Dushanka's life?, Pat asks "I can only say, buckle your seat belt and prepare for the ride. Whether it's signing up for Bikram yoga (good for balance and upper body strength—you know, for women of a certain age), preparing for a walking marathon, or just hanging out, the experience always broadens your horizon and will never bore you. Dushanka is also a wonderful strategist, whether trying to get an important work project launched or figure out how to pack more events into less time. She is also funny and unpretentious. In a society that often is characterized by self-promotion, there is the concern that Dushanka is a bit self-effacing. However, it is clear that her accomplishments speak for her and they speak volumes.

Longtime friend Susie Alberts credits Dushanka for introducing her to many things, all the Chicago museums, bookstores, bike paths, parks, and to her incredible family. Dushanka's intelligence, attention to detail, openness, resourcefulness, curiosity, and ability to put things in perspective, and her ability to create a joyful world, fully accepting any problem that appears, have made her a treasured friend.

Since 1980, Dr. Kleinman has been in a variety of positions at the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research. During that time she has worked with four different directors and since 1991 she has been deputy director. She also served as acting director of the institute for over a year. In all of these roles she has strongly supported disease prevention and health promotion activities and led the

institute in developing research agendas addressing disparities in oral health. If Dushanka had not provided a little money to conduct baseline surveys on oral cancer, we would not have the state models of oral cancer prevention and early detection. On more than one occasion, she has had to educate the NIDCR director vis-à-vis dental public health because usually they are basic researchers. More recently, she served as the co-editor, major strategist, and major contributor to the "Surgeon General's Report, Oral Health in America." This first-ever surgeon general's report on oral health was a monumental effort that took several years of concentrated effort. As you know, earlier this year a "National Call to Action to Promote Oral Health" was released. She was intimately involved in the process and the product. She also has been a major contributor to Healthy People 1990, 2000, and 2010—our national health objectives. Without her input, the NIDCR would not have been a major player in this important effort.

Dr. Kleinman is the first woman dentist to earn the rank of Rear Admiral in the US Public Health Service, which attests to her many talents and contributions to public health throughout the years. She also is the first chief dental officer to receive the Knutson Award while serving in that position. She has published numerous scientific articles and book chapters and is the recipient of many awards. Clearly, Dushanka V. Kleinman has distinguished herself as extraordinary public health and a wonderful human being. Although she is MY Dushanka to her mother, she is OUR admiral and a dental public health treasurer. Dushanka, you are truly deserving of this most prestigious award. Congratulations!

## Remarks on Receiving the 2003 APHA Knutson Award

**Dushanka V. Kleinman, DDS, MScD**

It is a great honor to be the recipient of the APHA John W. Knutson Distinguished Service Award in Dental Public Health. I did not believe the words I was hearing when John Brown called

to inform me. Thoughts of, "Is he kidding? So much more remains to be done!" and "Am I really this old?" ran through my mind. I never thought I would thank anyone for making me

feel old, but I do thank the Awards Committee, the nominator, the Section Council, Chair Jane Steffensen, and Colgate Pharmaceuticals for this special honor. The truth is that nothing in

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