

What the ACADEMY means to me – A Legacy of Leadership



I would like to thank Past-president Carol Lefebvre and Program Chair Kent Knoernschild for inviting me to present at the 107th meeting of the Academy of Prosthodontics in Scottsdale, Arizona.

In our brief time together, I would like to present some of my observations over the last 53 years that I have enjoyed being part of our Academy and share with you some personal experiences and describe what an important and significant role our Academy has made in my personal and professional life. This presentation is not meant to be a fund-raising speech, but I will briefly discuss why giving back financially is so important to our organization and our dental schools. After considerable thought and reflection, perhaps the best way to communicate my thoughts would be to discuss the events that have occurred over my associate, active and life member years as I have enjoyed them very much. The second part of this brief presentation describes how and why I was able to retire after 11 years in private practice.

The **Associate Fellowship** years. There exists a membership evolution within all of us. The history and traditions of our Academy confirms that we initially gathered primarily because of a common interest in prosthodontics, and that is definitely true today, especially with the introduction of new associates worldwide. Our love of prosthodontics, service to the profession and ultimately to our patients is still a common bond.

My association with our Academy all started in 1970 when I was a graduate student at the University of Washington with Chuck Bolender, Charlie Swoope and Dale Smith as my mentors. At that time the Academy's Educational & Research Foundation of Prosthodontics, which was formed from private contributions, granted me \$600 to assist with purchase of equipment for my Master's thesis.

This research was presented at my first meeting in Dallas Texas in 1972. Actually, it was like meeting "Who's Who" in Prosthodontics, and I was awed and pleasantly surprised at the same time. I was also surprised to learn of the Academy's limited membership. All Fellows made me feel very welcome. As you know at that time our Academy was primarily a denture group and named of the Academy of Denture Prosthetics. All Fellows served as role models in their unique way, during my Active Fellowship years and still do today.

The goals and purposes of our Academy helped me form not only a personal philosophy, but a professional one as well. It is a very interesting evolution to review how we have changed when we view our life long association with the Academy over the years.

The **Active Fellowship** years included three more presentations, many committee meetings, visiting wonderful locations for our annual meetings throughout the United States, which developed more meaningful relationships with our fellows. I was learning and appreciating the members even more at each successive meeting which assumed more importance. Some of my best life long friends are sitting very close to you. The active and life members were role models to me and continue to do so. Getting to know them, what they stood for, what they had accomplished and learning what they were all about was and is very exciting. Then also, I began to mourn the tremendous loss of our great educators when the resolution reports and tributes were read. Gradually we were losing these prosthodontic giants that trained our generation.

My perspective as a **Life Fellow** changed from emphasis on learning from the scientific programs to appreciating the fellowship relationships even more. Most importantly to me was their friendship and tremendous love for our Academy over their professional lifetimes to giving back in some ways as others before me had done making significant differences in my personal and professional life. Really that is what it is all about to me, making a significant meaningful difference and giving back to our Academy as it was given to me by our predecessors. Also, much thought has been given to the future of prosthodontics and the educators who provide this inspiration.

The expression “MAKING A DIFFERENCE or PAYING IT FORWARD” became popular MANY years ago and is still very important today. Your presence here indicates you too are also committed to making a difference in your lives, your families, practices, students and most of all those patients that we serve.

I get a lot of questions about why the fellowships at the Universities of Maryland and Washington were started. It’s just something that I wanted to do to show my appreciation for the excellent quality of education that I received at these educational institutions, and I wanted to give something back to them. Others that preceded me made my education possible, and I want to do my part for those that follow. I couldn’t have finished my dental school education without financial support.

The tremendous costs of dental school education and the resulting debt service it creates have sky rocked in the last 50 years. Today the cost for a dental degree exceeds \$400,000. The majority of graduating dentists can’t afford to purchase a practice or start one from scratch.

A graduating dentist with that much debt, who is married, wanting to start a family, buy a new car, a home and accepts a position as an associate in private practice is in long term financial debt. Incurring additional debt for graduate school training is not a realistic option for many graduates, let alone thinking about pursuing an academic career. Banks today are hesitant to lend funds for startup practices with that much personal debt.

These alarming statistics translate into a much more a significant and larger problem when we look for dental school educators. I have talked with a few deans and many department chairmen and finding quality faculty today, like the ones that taught us are getting increasingly difficult

This is the main reason the fellowships were established to ease, in part, the financial burden of graduate school and attract qualified graduate students that are interested in pursuing academic careers. The better students select those institutions that provide stipends and funding for their graduate education. I am hopeful that more of us will follow to provide fellowships in all specialty disciplines to increase the academic pool of dental educators.

I wanted to give enough to make a difference, rather than a token contribution. Of course, a substantial amount is included in my will, but then I won’t have the opportunity to enjoy my gifts looking down from heaven. I want to enjoy my gifts the rest of my lifetime and to see the graduate students develop in their careers, act as their coach and assist them enjoying the successes that I have been blessed with. Recipients understand that someone helped them, and hopefully in return they will do the same for others in the future. Helping others is what it’s all about to me. It’s really up to us to get the funding started now and keep it going for the future of our wonderful profession that we chose to serve our patients.

Academy of Prosthodontics Foundation

It was Cliff Van Blarcomb's idea to begin the AP Foundation and in 1989 President elect Dale Smith asked me to assist him with organizing and establishing the AP Foundation. We devoted several years with assistance forming a 501-C non-profit corporation to enable our Fellows the opportunity to contribute directly and also make bequests as part of their estate planning. Today the AP Foundation is growing and healthy under the leadership of Carol Lefaivre, Lisa Lang and Lily Garcia.

As Academy members we share a responsibility to make a difference in our specialty, continue to mentor our students, being an active resource to them, support specialty programs, provide funds for student loans and scholarships as those that preceded did for us. The personal returns are in measurable.

I would be delighted to assist you in organizing a fellowship or starting a graduate alumni association to increase the pool of Prosthodontic educators which remains a critical problem in our dental schools today.

My professional journey

Several people have asked me how I was able to retire after 11 years of practice. My goal was 10 years, accomplished that, however I took me another year to find a talented and caring board-certified prosthodontist who was Rodger Lawton. I'm about to share some personal information and how that goal was accomplished. First, at that time in 1980 after leaving the UW, I didn't have any kids, wasn't married and needed to make a major life change when I was in my late 30's. It's often said that "Life begins at 40" and that's what I wanted to do.

Then I was an associate professor at the UW with Chuck Bolender's prosthodontic program with Dale Smith and assisting Charlie Swoope teaching our graduate students two days a week. Also had a two-day a week prosthodontic practice at a Seattle Dental Clinic. When I was not working, of course, went fishing and having a great time. It was a fun ride for several years but needed to get serious about my life, purchase a home, begin a private practice and to achieve final independence, but only had about \$20,000 in the bank. Those were great goals, but I didn't know how to start or make those important decisions.

I attended a course "More Time Good Time" which taught me how to make meaningful correct decisions the first time, set achievable goals and most of all manage my time effectively. Read lots of books on investing, retirement planning, money management, and on personal development skills. Perhaps my best decision was to hire a personal advisor and financial coach to help me. It was a very expensive fee \$230 an hour but worth it. The most valuable thing I learned was how to correctly select other advisors to help me, for example an attorney, CPA, practice management consultant, realtor, investment manager, etc.

Decided to move to Olympia, WA which then was a small town of 25,000 people, 60 miles south of Seattle, with 75 general dentists, buy a home in the country on 5 acres, rent a 1,500 sq.ft. ground floor office in a new building across from St. Peter Hospital on a bus line. All this took a lot of money. And my coach taught me how to effectively borrow about \$300,000 from a local bank for my home and office construction. Ever since 1953 when the first Corvette became available, I wanted one of those all my adult life. So, I convinced the local bank vice president to loan me another \$10,000 to buy, a like new used, 1964 Stingray coupe to reward myself. But just told him that I need some home furnishings, a riding lawn mower, garden tools for my new home, but not the real truth.

The first couple of years of practice were extremely difficult getting referrals from local dentists. I had an open house, took about 25 GP's to dinner, had Christmas parties, and so on, but that didn't improve the referral base. I started staffing with highly paid experienced dental assistants and receptionists which

didn't work. I did my own lab work in the evenings and on weekends and was burning out trying to enjoy myself and pay off a large debt.

Then I decided to make some significant changes. I hired a removable lab technician for the office, decided to accept an old adage "Hire the person and teach the skills". Then I hired a dental assistant who wasn't certified, a transcriptionist who functioned a second front desk person, a receptionist and a parttime book keeper. I'm happy to report that 4 of them remained with the practice after it was sold the first time and 3 remained after the second time and remain there today. I learned about how to build a meaningful team and then when we got very busy decided to make them partners in my practice by rewarding them with 20% of my net distributable income above a base level. Of course, this didn't include my salary or purchase of a new Corvette every couple of years that I needed for "business usage".

We were very, very busy mostly because of committed new patients that wanted quality caring service. We developed mainly a patient-based referral practice. At that time the medical and dental care was all about excellence and caring, but our healthcare objectives have radically changed since then, and my opinion is that now it all about money. We had a working-class practice, people that paid their bills. We accepted dental insurance as a downpayment and made payment arrangements on the balance.

In summary want to share a couple of my thoughts. One of my personal mantras for over 40 years has been "*The more you give...the more you get*". I don't mean this just financially, but that is true in all our lives. However, the true meaning is giving of ourselves which can be done in many ways. In the office we did something for each patient at no charge and didn't make a big deal about it. There are many other ways to achieve this inner happiness for ourselves and those who we have personal contact with is giving to our friends, those that work for us, someone who cares, or even strangers something special every day such as a very generous tip, holding a door open for someone, pausing on the highway to let an 18 wheeler in front of us, or a smile to a cash register checker or a stranger.

Give it a try and you will feel very happy too.

Thank you and I hope some of my comments will be helpful to you.

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