AAP President’s Address*

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Each of us has the ability to achieve. None of us has the ability to do it alone.

Bernard of Chartres, the French philosopher, once said, “We are like dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, so that we can see more than they, and things at a greater distance, not by virtue of any physical distinction, but because we are carried high and raised up by their giant size.”

Wikipedia defines mentorship as “the developmental relationship between a more experienced mentor and a less experienced partner referred to as a protégé, a person guided and protected by a more prominent person.” For me, that mentor, that person, was Dr. Robert Gottsegen. Just as a mother reaches down to her child to offer a hand when crossing a busy street, so did Bob Gottsegen reach a hand down to me to lift me up. I recall the first time I met Bob. I was a second-year dental student at Columbia and had a work/study job at the school as a photographer. I was summoned to Bob’s office to help him photograph some figures for a lecture. Bob immediately took an interest in me, and he began to question my motivation in applying to dental school. I told him my story – that I had every intention of being a periodontist and not a general dentist because in the 8 years of working my way through college as a dental assistant, it was only when I began working for a periodontist that my interest was truly piqued. Bob Gottsegen, who was at that time the chair of periodontics at Columbia, took me under his wing from that day forward, guiding and mentoring me through the process, and eventually asked me to join his private practice along with his other partner, Dr. Paul Tannenbaum.

I have never met a more generous spirit than Bob, always willing to discuss with you any topic of intellectual interest from art to politics to vintage wines. Bob mentored not only me, but also hundreds of students in his wake. He always had time to explain, to demonstrate, or to just lend a sympathetic ear. He embodies what it is to be a true mentor, and I will be eternally grateful to him for what he did for me.

There were numerous others who also mentored me from a very young age. There was Mrs. Daisa in fifth grade, who assigned me an oral report on the turbine engine. After I gave my report along with the poster I drew, she looked at me with great pride and said, “A+++!” No one was more surprised at that moment than I. Then there was Mrs. Lamantia in ninth grade, who taught me to love Shakespeare. When I got word that I was accepted into the Bronx High School of Science, it was she I told first. She hugged me and told me she always believed in me. Later, there were two periodontists I was working for when I was in college, Drs. Bob Goldman and Ken Siegel, who both talked me into going to dental school instead of being a psychotherapist because they thought I could have a great career in dentistry. It is also these people who believe in you long before it ever occurs to you to believe in yourself who are the true mentors of the world. It is the teachers, in whatever form they come in, who mold our intellectual journey. There are those moments, those chance meetings, and those words of advice or encouragement that may only be evident in retrospect that can forever transform our lives.

As a member of the Board of Trustees for the last 10 years, culminating in this presidency, I have had the opportunity to become intimately familiar with the landscape of challenges that face our profession. Over the years, there has been a blurring of the specialties and an encroachment on scope-of-practice issues. These battles are ongoing, and I assure you that your Academy is vigilant, to the extent that it can be, about protecting our specialty. There are endless simple solutions and sophisticated gadgets that tout painless cures for periodontal disease that have emerged at regular intervals since the inception of periodontics. Do not be afraid, for those that have merit and scientific validity will survive and those that do not will fade away. When you have been in practice for 27 years, you put those types of challenges in perspective. Embrace new technology, stay true to what is in the best interest of the patient, and you can never be wrong.

In my opinion, the dark cloud on our horizon that you may or may not be aware of is the issue of access to care. This, to me, is a serious threat to the practice of periodontics as we know it. The challenge of providing quality access to care is the focus of the American Dental Association (ADA) leadership these days, and it must be ours as well. In this short speech, I cannot educate you on this very complex subject, but it behooves each and every one of you to become familiar with the concepts of independent mid-level providers, the advanced hygiene practitioner, and dental health aide therapists, as well as other access strategies that our colleagues at the ADA are struggling with every day. When discussing this at dinner one night, my
son Andrew reminded me of a scene in the 1985 film *RAN* by the very famous Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. The word ran means “revolt,” and the film is based on the Shakespearean play *King Lear*. The scene that Andrew referred to is when the warlord Hidetora was dividing his kingdom up among his three sons Taro, Jiro, and Saburo. The eldest son Taro was to receive the most prestigious castle, and the other two sons would receive the lesser properties, with instructions from their father to support and defend the eldest brother from “life’s bitter arrows.” When the youngest son complained, the father asked him to break a quiver, which he did easily. He then handed his son three arrows bundled together and asked him to again try to break them, and he could not. The father then told him, “A single arrow is easily broken. Not so three together. Whenever Taro is in trouble, if you unite your forces, the house of Ichimonji will be safe.”

So, too, does the tripartite system of dentistry need to join together so that our house will be safe. We need to find a solution to this crisis that is equitable, and provides the highest level of professional care that all the citizens of our great nation deserve. If you think this will not affect periodontists, you are dead wrong. If we continue to be an elitist specialty, we will not survive.

Now, it is time for me to say thank you. First to my family; to my sons Andrew, who stood at the screen door when you were 2 years old and cried, “Mommy, don’t go;” and Griffin, who whined on the phone when I was half a world away, “When are you coming home?” Thank you both for understanding and for growing up into beautiful young men despite your mother’s frequent absences. To my husband Arden, who changed more diapers than I ever did, thank you for always allowing me to be who I am and for your unwavering support and love. To the staff at the AAP, thank you for being the true professionals you are and for always making me look good, and especially Alice DeForest, who whispered words of wisdom in my ear at all the critical moments. To my fellow officers, the stars did align just right. I believe it is called celestial convergence, and I certainly leave the Academy in very capable hands. To the Board, thank you for putting up with my 4 a.m. e-mails and my very shaky knowledge of parliamentary procedure. And finally, to you, the membership. They say that if you love what you are doing, you never need to work a day in your life. Well, I loved being your president! That’s not to say there weren’t sleepless nights and stressful days, but it was the greatest learning and growing experience of my life to date.

There is one other person whom I must thank today – President Kevin Mosher of Nobel Biocare. Kevin came to me a couple of years ago wanting to support and honor me as president in some meaningful way. After much discussion, I am pleased to tell you that Nobel Biocare will be making a $50,000 donation to the Education Fund in honor of all the mentors we have talked about today. So, for all the Bowerses, and Gottsegens, and Ammonses in our lives, and for the next generation of periodontists to whom we need to extend a hand, I would like you to join me and all the other generous sponsors and members who have contributed to the Education Fund and write a check in honor of the mentors in our lives who have given us this wonderful profession so that we can continue to be a strong and proud American Academy of Periodontology.

Thank you!