Different generations, same love of dentistry

When Dr. Donna Thompson entered dental school in the fall of 1974, she was one of five women in her class of 71 students at the Creighton University School of Dentistry in Omaha. She and her female classmates bonded over breaking the glass ceiling but said it could be intimidating at times.

“We had a mixed reception from fellow male classmates and our faculty,” Dr. Thompson, 63, recalled. “Some of the men respected us, but many others questioned why we were there. We often felt like we had to go above and beyond to prove ourselves each day, to prove that we were capable of doing a man’s job, so to speak. In the end, the challenge was well worth it.”

Contrast that to when her daughter, Jennifer, entered dental school at the University of North Carolina School of Dentistry in 2004. Thirty years later, being female was a nonissue. In fact, Dr. Jennifer Thompson said she barely thought about it.

“I never felt I was being seen as a female or a male. I was just a dental student,” said Dr. Jennifer Thompson, 35.

After Dr. Thompson graduated in 2008, she joined her mom’s practice in Farmington, New Mexico. Together, the two doctors run a five-operatory practice that sees about 500 patients a month.

At first, she envisioned working with her mother for a year or so as she got her feet wet in the day-to-day life as a general dentist. Nine years later, she can’t imagine not working together.

“We are so lucky to be able to function as a team with a wonderful equilibrium between us,” she said. “What I have seen over the past [nine] years is small compared to the 39 years she has been in practice.”

Said Dr. Donna Thompson about working with her daughter, “She has reinvigorated both me and the practice. She not only brought a fresh perspective with updated materials and new technology, but she also generated a new way of thinking and managing the practice. There is nothing like a fresh set of eyes to open your mind to new ideas.”

One of those newer changes was modernizing the office.

“Our practice started embracing digital dentistry when Jennifer joined,” her mother said. “We updated our radiographs and computer systems and continue to make the transformation over time.”

When asked how she feels she influences her mom, Dr. Jennifer

Thompson said she thinks she helps remind her about the impact dentists can have on the world.

“We as dentists have the ability to touch the lives of individual patients on a daily basis, but we also can improve the community through events like Mission of Mercy and Give Kids A Smile,” said the younger Dr. Thompson. “We can serve as an agent of change through advocacy, volunteerism and community leadership.”

Dr. Jennifer Thompson’s involvement with organized dentistry — she’s the vice president-elect of the New Mexico Dental Association — has also had an impact on her mom.

“She has inspired me to become involved again,” Dr. Donna Thompson said.

Unlike the Thompsons, Dr. Nipa Thakkar and her father, Dr. Ramesh Thakkar, have no plans to practice together.

The elder Dr. Thakkar owns and operates two general dentistry practices in Queens, New York. Dr. Nipa Thakkar currently works as an associate in Wellsboro, Pennsylvania, although she is planning to buy a practice in the next year.

When she was a student at the Temple University-Maurice H. Kornberg School of Dentistry, Dr. Thakkar said her dad marveled at her course load and the scope of what she was learning.

“He was impressed with how in-depth the learning was after my first year of dental school and said it took him years to reach that level of understanding.”

During her father’s early years practicing dentistry, some dentists were still practicing without gloves, a fact that amazes his daughter.

“He thinks I am fussy because I complain about certain gloves not fitting right,” Dr. Nipa laughed. “He was like, ‘We didn’t even have gloves when I started, certain gloves not fitting right.” Dr. Nipa laughed. “He was like, ‘We didn’t even have gloves when I started, certain gloves not fitting right.”

“Practicing dentistry is always changing with advancements and research,” Dr. Ramesh Thakkar said. “New inventions, new technology and new material make you feel like in 28 years you have experienced totally new phases of dentistry. Even now as I take continuing education courses provided...
by local and state organizations, the profession changes and I feel changed too.”

After immigrating to New York from India in the 1970s, the senior Dr. Thakkar took out loans and worked part-time jobs to support his international doctorate at the New York University College of Dentistry.

“It was very hard work with student debt and two young children, and we had language barriers and economic hardships for years,” he recalled.

He opened his first practice in 1989 and worked hard to ensure both Nipa and her brother, a physician, never had to pay for school themselves.

“It’s a huge gift,” Dr. Nipa Thakkar said. “It’s how I’ve been able to practice however I want.”

“I am very happy that Nipa followed in my footsteps in dentistry, as she has very good hands in art and science,” said Dr. Ramesh Thakkar. “She has explored dentistry and made it her own. I am too proud to explain how she fulfilled not only my dreams but also her late grandfather’s dreams, at the same time being true to herself.”

Never a dull moment: New dentists discuss managing work with life and family

A partner dentist in a group practice in Massachusetts, a spouse and a mom to two children ages 5 and 3, Dr. Andrea Fallon knows well the day-to-day challenges of balancing job and family responsibilities.

“Dentists have worked so very hard to gain that degree, and owner dentists have an obligation to their practice and staff to continue to produce and keep the practice going,” said Dr. Fallon. “I find it difficult to make the time for both work and family. This balance is a daily struggle.”

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“One tool the ADA offers to help new dentists navigate the pressure is a collection of articles, videos and other resources related to stress management and work-life balance will be available at ADA 2017 – America’s Dental Meeting, including one focusing on emotional well-being and another offering an introduction to meditation.

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Memphis, Tenn. — Expected to be the first in his family to attend college, Quadarius Toney had no idea what he wanted to do after high school.

In his junior year, Mr. Toney decided to attend a symposium hosted by Determined to be a Doctor Someday (DDS), a program that provides mentorship and resources to Memphis-area high school students who wish to obtain doctorate degrees. Dr. Christina Rosenthal created the program as her project as a member of the 2010–11 class of the ADA Institute for Diversity in Leadership.

Four years later, the 20–year–old today is a junior at Howard University and studying sports medicine with a minor in chemistry. He is also currently applying to dental school.

“It all came from the DDS program,” Mr. Toney said. “I knew I wanted to be like Dr. Rosenthal. I want to work for myself, help people and help the community.”

The Institute for Diversity in Leadership is designed to provide education and leadership skills to dentists who are members of racial, ethnic and/or gender groups that have been traditionally underrepresented in leadership roles within the profession and their communities.

“The Institute taught me that there are so many ways in approaching and solving problems,” Dr. Rosenthal said. “And the courses, from marketing to running a nonprofit, were instrumental to where I am now.”

Today, she’s doing what she’s learned from the Institute to further her work in the community.

Dr. Rosenthal is producing and posting on her practice’s website “cheesy but creative” videos to help educate her patients, along with the greater Memphis community, about oral health, including what’s involved in patients, along with the greater Memphis community, about oral health, including what’s involved in dental care and how to make their visits to the dentists more comfortable.

“My goal is to show people the benefit of dentistry in their lives,” she said.

In addition, Dr. Rosenthal said she is working to better improve the DDS program, developing a system to better track graduates. Although she’s received communication from previous graduates about their studies in college, Dr. Rosenthal said she has not closely tracked where her graduates have gone on after high school and the program.

“One thing I learned when it comes to advocacy from any organization is that you need to have some proven data, some sort of tracking system,” she said. “I’ve started this process to see how many future DDS graduates go to a four-year institution and/or pursue a career in health care.”

“The program’s goal: Help young people who come from similar backgrounds as Dr. Rosenthal’s become health care professionals in hopes they will return to their communities and help decrease health care access disparity. Dr. Rosenthal hopes future graduates of the program follow a path similar to Mr. Toney’s, who was among the first group of students in the DDS program.

For him, Dr. Rosenthal has become his mentor, providing guidance throughout his college years.

“My parents didn’t go to college so they’re not as familiar with what I go through in my studies,” Mr. Toney said. Dr. Rosenthal, he said, has been there to share her experience, especially when he’s concerned about his GPA or a certain class.

“She’s been a wonderful mentor,” he said. “And the fact that she continues to work hard in furthering her education and gain more knowledge, she’s like Wonder Woman.”

For more information on the Institute, visit ADA.org/diversityinstitute.

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ADA New Dentist News

2016–2017 ADA New Dentist Committee

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Study clubs from a business perspective

Englewood, Colo. — For new dentists, there can be a lot to learn when it comes to creating or running a small business.

Establishing the necessary business elements and learning how to run a successful dental practice can provide challenges early in one’s career.

The Colorado Dental Association New Dentist Committee is taking a unique approach in an effort to help their member dentists bridge the gap.

Over the past few years, Dr. Justin Pearson, a 2008 University of Michigan School of Dentistry graduate and current chair of the Colorado Dental Association New Dentist Committee, has been working with a team of general dentists and sponsors who volunteer their time to organize quarterly study clubs aimed solely at providing business education to their members.

Because Colorado is a large state that encompasses more than 100,000 square miles, the New Dentist Committee also live-streams each study club session for free in an effort to reach dentists who cannot make it to the study club on a given night. Podcasts will soon be available on the Colorado Dental Association website (cdaanline.com) and New Dentist Committee Facebook page (facebook.com/ColoradoNewDentistCommittee) to allow members to listen to the programs at their leisure. Watch parties for the study clubs are also regularly organized in other communities to encourage engagement throughout the state as members watch the presentations together.

The program is interactive and attendees can ask the presenters questions from the outreach locations via an online chat function.

“I really enjoy networking with our younger colleagues and owe a lot to the many clinicians who have helped me get my start over my first nine years in general practice,” Dr. Pearson said. He enjoys keeping current on the latest trends in dentistry and maintains that these networking opportunities afforded to young dentists allow them to share ideas and work together to solve many business quandaries.

Dentists who are interested in finding a study club near them, including ones that offer continuing education, can contact their local or state dental society.
Greater St. Louis Dental Society finds key to engaging new dentists: Fun

St. Louis — “The Price is Right.” “Family Feud.” “The Ellen DeGeneres Show.” Spoofing classic game shows and morning talk shows into activities may seem silly. But for the Greater St. Louis Dental Society, it’s been the key to engaging new dentists.

“It’s taken some trial and error, and we’ve had a couple of failures,” said Susan Prosperi, Greater St. Louis Dental Society membership and public education director. “But today, people really look forward to the events.”

The games and activities allow the Greater St. Louis Dental Society New Dentist Committee, which began in 2011, to inform new dentists, especially recent graduates, the benefits they receive from organized dentistry, earn continuing education credits and network professionally with their colleagues.

“New dentists need to be able to get together with their peers, see friends, network, and in the process, they can see that organized dentistry has their back,” Ms. Prosperi said. “It solidifies the importance and benefits of organized dentistry.”

It’s also been a way to just have fun.

For a welcome event for new graduates last fall, a member of the Greater St. Louis Dental Society New Dentist Committee had suggested the idea of doing an NCAA-type tournament bracket with the simplest of games: rock, paper, scissors.

“A lot of the staff members looked at each other and said, ‘Really?’” Ms. Prosperi said. “But the committee members said it would be great, and of course, they were totally right. Everyone was laughing and hollering at the event.”

About 50 new dentists attended the event and the committee plans on doing the tournament again this year. In 2015, the committee held a “New Dentist Feud” activity, loosely based on the popular game show “Family Feud.” Attendees earned continuing education and competed for prizes. Last year, the committee held a spoof talk show that educated attendees about the benefits they receive at the local, state and national level. The talk show included a Publishing Clearing House spoof, which grew another 2 percent from 2016.

“We have had openings in various committees and we didn’t have enough spots for the number of new dentists who wanted to fill them,” Ms. Prosperi said. “We’ve had some new dentists to become representatives in various committees because we didn’t want to tell them ‘no.’”

The dental society has a 75 percent market share of new dentists in their area, which grew another 2 percent from 2016. “We have had openings in various committees and we didn’t have enough spots for the number of new dentists who wanted to fill them,” Ms. Prosperi said. “We’ve had some new dentists to become representatives in various committees because we didn’t want to tell them ‘no.’”

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