ALUMNI PROFILE:
Teresa DeStefano, D’89
Editor’s Note: While we normally feature a story on a Penn Dental Medicine graduate in this section of the Journal, in this issue, we are pleased to share a story by a Penn Dental Medicine alumna — Dr. Teresa DeStefano (D’89) — who tells of the special bond she formed with one of her dental school patients and offers a reminder of the important role all patients play in dental education. Today, Dr. DeStefano and her husband and fellow Penn Dental Medicine alumnus, John F. Raziano (D’88), have a private practice together in Raritan, N.J.

Letters from Mrs. Siddell
by Teresa DeStefano, D’89
The year was 1987, and I was beginning my clinical rotations at Penn Dental Medicine, looking forward to putting into practice what had only been done to dentoform teeth. Time to work on real patients! Lucky for me and my future husband, John, the chart that landed on my lap from the “lottery” of patients with no doctors belonged to Mrs. Siddell — a special woman, who would quickly become my favorite patient.

A lovelier person you could not imagine. There she was with short, curly, strawberry blonde hair, rosy cheeks, sparkling blue eyes, and a big smile to match. Soon after we met, she consented to sit for John’s mock board — a gesture he never forgot.

Month after month, year after year, she came in — always on time. She sat through instructor checks, terribly placed rubber dams, and extremely long procedures. We celebrated John’s graduation together, and then, she was there for me. It seemed amazing to me what she did for us, so when it was my turn to graduate and say good-bye, I passed her to a good friend in the class behind me. And I kept her address!

I don’t know if it was unusual or not to keep in touch with patients after graduation. I suspect we were not the only ones to form strong bonds with them. So, after I graduated, and John and I moved back to New Jersey, Mrs. Siddell and I became pen pals. She would hand write in a lovely cursive, pages and pages of news from her life in Philadelphia. She would report on her new dental students and what she was having done to her teeth — all described in glorious detail. Then she would tell me about her family — who got married, what grandchild was born, how she and her husband, Bill, were doing. Good times and tragedies have all been recounted. Normally, our letters pass in the mail over the Christmas season. As they grew, my children would ask, “did your patient send her letter yet this year?” for it became an annual tradition to read it aloud together at dinner.

Over the last few years, sadly, Mrs. Siddell and her husband have had more health issues than good news. And so, this year, she finally had to leave her beloved Penn Dental Medicine, because she physically could not make the trip. I advised her that it was fine to see a local dentist, as the trip and the waiting would be too stressful on them. Reluctantly, she agreed.

As I think of Mrs. Siddell, I hope that the current Penn Dental Medicine students are building special bonds with their patients, and more importantly, appreciate that they are helping them on their journey. Admittedly, treating patients in dental school was not always a blissful situation. Many times, I waited on patients that never showed up, I agonized over getting procedures done, and spent many sleepless nights hoping that my “last crown” would come in. But most memories are of the good times — appreciative patients, who depended on us for their care and who waited for us to hone our skills. When I whiz through procedures today, I often think back on those 3-hour amalgam visits — did that really happen? They surely did, and we have our patients to thank for their help and patience in our growth as professionals.