ALUMNI PROFILE:  
Dr. Umit Yigit (C’81, D’86)  
By Alandra Lee Gardner

Dr. Umit Yigit (C’81, D’86) is not your average dentist or typical businessman. A new member of Penn Dental Medicine’s Board of Overseers, he has built, owned, and operated dental practices, high-capacity nursing home facilities, and constructed new home developments, all while maintaining a 60-hour-a-week work schedule, and hasn’t stopped yet. "I have always had a strong entrepreneurial spirit within me,” he says. "That same passion applies within my profession and outside of dentistry.”

Appointed to the Board in June for a three-year renewable term, Dr. Yigit’s extensive experience building thriving health care facilities and excelling in other businesses from the ground up is a strong asset to the School, focused on providing a comprehensive learning experience for students, including the area of practice management. Penn Dental Medicine’s Board of Overseers provides volunteer leadership for the School and acts as an advisory resource for the Dean and other administrative leaders, while stewarding the missions of both the School and University.

Born in Bursa, Turkey, located in the country’s northwestern region, just south of Istanbul, Dr. Yigit is the son of a physician who moved his family to the United States in the 1950s to practice medicine. During stays in Denver and rural New York, Dr. Yigit says that his parents impressed upon him an expectation to follow his father’s path in the health professions and he was greatly inspired by the examples they set. “I saw the fruits of my parents’ labor and wanted to continue that trend — to take it as far as I could go,” he says.

While attending Penn’s School of Arts and Sciences, he became focused on dentistry, partly because it offered a fixed schedule, unlike that of his father who was on call. Years later, Dr. Yigit would find this time outside of the practice an invaluable resource for planning what would be many successful entrepreneurial ventures. In 1986, he earned a DMD from Penn Dental Medicine and went on to train in prosthodontics at Columbia University. After relocating to the greater Washington, D.C. area, he began to build a family and establish his first dental practice.

Over the course of 13 years, Dr. Yigit constructed, owned, operated, and sold six more practices in the area. With sharpened business skills and the desire for a new challenge, he then successfully reached into the highly-regulated domain of large-scale nursing homes, building and operating two 150-bed facilities, located in Maryland and Virginia, which were later sold to national health care chains. “I was swimming with the sharks,” Dr. Yigit says with a chuckle of relief. “I took extremely calculated risks—there was no room for error.” He was later presented with an opportunity to invest in three acres of D.C.-area real estate and could not pass up the opportunity, building over 40 new home developments on the land. While all of his many endeavors have been extremely rewarding, Dr. Yigit makes it very clear where his passion lies. “I will not leave my profession,” he says. “The satisfaction of pulling a grateful patient’s tooth is much more gratifying than any business deal I have ever done.”

For over 20 years, Dr. Yigit has made generous financial contributions to Penn Dental Medicine, including his most significant pledge this year, and says the urge to give back was always present, even as a young alumnus. “I am a product of my Penn education and I always have that in the front of my mind,” he says. “I feel a moral obligation to help future generations of dentists succeed. I want them to have the best experience and training that this profession can provide.”

In the spirit of giving, Dr. Yigit established the Turkish Heritage Scholarship at the University of Pennsylvania in 2007. This tuition subsidy is awarded each year to a uniquely qualified, financially disadvantaged international student from Turkey. He also plans to actively seek opportunities to connect with and advise Penn Dental Medicine students as a part of his Board of Overseers post.

Currently residing in Boca Raton, Fla., with his wife Serap and two children, Dr. Yigit operates and works at his eighth and ninth dental practices. And just when it seems that he is ready to slow down, Dr. Yigit says, “By the way, I also own six pizza delivery businesses.”