





PASS AT 30

PROVIDING FOREIGN-TRAINED DENTISTS A PATH TO PRACTICE

IN MARCH, THE newest class of foreign-trained dentists began their studies in Penn Dental Medicine's Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS), joining 120 students already enrolled in the Class of 2018. The diverse group of 14 women and 15 men come from 12 countries spanning three continents.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the formal PASS program which, including the Class of 2018, will have graduated 888 foreign-trained dentists from 83 countries around the globe, enabling them to take state licensing exams and practice in the U.S. (and there are even more alumni from the early beginning of PASS, before it became a formalized program).

Dr. Uri Hangorsky, Clinical Professor of Periodontics, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Student Life and Director of PASS, says there are many reasons for foreign-trained dentists want to practice in the U.S. Some are leaving war-torn countries and political persecution, others are joining family members in the U.S. and just about all are seeking better lives and career opportunities.

The program is clearly meeting a need. The first 12 PASS students enrolled in 1986, and within six years enrollment was up to 31 students. This year, almost 1,000 foreign-trained dentists applied for the 29 spots in the Class of 2018.

Prior to 1986, there were less formal opportunities for foreign-trained dentists to enroll at Penn Dental Medicine, primarily for those who were faculty members or had come for advanced training. One of those was Dr. Peter Berthold (D'83), Professor Emeritus of Preventive and Restorative Sciences, who went on to direct the School's PASS program from its first formal year in 1986 to 2005.

"Political situations in the world have made many individuals leave their countries," says Dr. Berthold, who after retiring from Penn Dental Medicine joined the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry to start a similar program. "Several students in the first class had been in refugee camps before they came to the U.S., and one student from Czechoslovakia had crawled across the border to Hungary and said every time he put down a hand or knee he expected a mine to blow up."

After earning his DDS and PhD degrees in his native Sweden, in 1979 Dr. Berthold came to Penn Dental Medicine to do postdoc-



also noting that Dr. Naty Lopez, who joined him in 1989 to help direct PASS, played an instrumental role in helping to build the School's program. She later joined Dr. Ber-

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toral research. Although initially he planned to return home, in 1981 he joined the Penn Dental Medicine Class of 1983 to earn his DMD here, after which he joined the faculty as assistant professor. His background gave him valuable insights into the experience of future PASS students.

"It was important that I had done what they were going to do, it made them trust me and do their absolute best," says Dr. Berthold, now retired from the University of Minnesota. Of the 500 or so PASS students enrolled during his tenure, he says only one failed to complete the program. "I'm extremely proud of the program and the students," he says,

thold at the University of Minnesota, where she is now associate professor and assistant dean for admissions and diversity.

Since that first year, interest and applications have continued to grow. Penn Dental Medicine's international reputation and the strength of the PASS program have made it a draw for students from every continent except Antarctica, stretching from Albania and Cambodia to Canada, China, Fiji, Mongolia, Myanmar, Poland, Sri Lanka, Tanzania and Uzbekistan.

One of the hallmarks of Penn Dental Medicine's PASS program is the full integration of the foreign-trained dentists with the

existing class of predoctoral DMD students. Currently, PASS students start in March with an 11-week preparatory program and then integrate with the third-year class at the start of the academic year.

Beginning next year with the Class of 2019, however, PASS students will start the program in January, fully joining their class in the second semester of the second year. Dr. Hangorsky says this will provide additional preclinical and laboratory training, supplemented with seminars, for PASS students, and allow them earlier immersion with their classmates.

Although PASS students generally are thrilled to have the opportunity to study at Penn Dental Medicine, many do face challenges, Dr. Hangorsky says. These include acclimating to a new country and city; separation from spouses, children and family members who may remain in unsafe regions; concerns about immigration status; and financial worries.

Yet, the benefits of the PASS program are clear, both for students and Penn Dental Medicine. "The program brings very talented people with a different perspective to Penn Dental Medicine, creating a multicultural environment," Dr. Hangorsky says. "It's a great asset to the School, to the students, and to our admissions efforts. It makes us a global university and sets us apart from others."

PREVIOUS PAGE: Left to right: PASS students Ashish Gurav (D'17) and Rasha Yalda (D'16); Dr. Uri Hangorsky, Director of PASS; and PASS students Nadeem Azeez (D'16); Sri Thatikonda (D'16, seated); Armine Janjughazova (D'16), and Raffie Garabedian (D'17).

THIRTY YEARS AGO, Penn Dental Medicine formally established its Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS) to enable foreign-trained dentists to practice in the U.S. Graduates have gone on to teach, practice, and conduct research throughout the U.S. Following are the compelling stories of an alumna and current student — what brought them to Penn Dental Medicine's PASS program and its impact on their lives and careers.

Changing Course after a Revolution

Dr. Mahvash Navazesh (GD'78, GD'80, D'83) had no intention of staying in the U.S. when she came to Penn Dental Medicine in 1977 for a one-year general practice residency. But a revolution in her home country of Iran forced her to consider another path, and has led to a prominent career in academic dentistry and research in the decades since then.

Today, Dr. Navazesh is Professor of Diagnostic Sciences and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs and Student Life at the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of University of Southern California. In addition to teaching and service, over the past 30 years, she has focused her research on salivary gland function and disturbed oral sensation, an interest she first cultivated at Penn Dental Medicine.

Her research has led to protocols for measuring saliva and managing patients with Sjogren's syndrome, an autoimmune disease whose common symptoms are dry eyes and mouth. Her current research is focused on saliva as a diagnostic fluid in risk assessment and disease prevention and the impact of HIV infection on salivary gland function.

Dr. Navazesh joined the USC faculty in 1987, ten years after she left Iran. In addition to her current positions, over the years she has served as Acting Dean of the School of Dentistry; Chair of the Division of Diagnostic Sciences; Director of Oral Medicine Residency Program and Director of the Office of Medical Affairs — the first person appointed to that position at the School of Dentistry.

Her path to this outstanding career, however, was far from easy. After earning her D.M.D. from Pahlavi University School of Dental Medicine in Iran, Dr. Navazesh



Dr. Mahvash Navazesh (GD'78, GD'80, D'83)

left Iran in August 1977 with a government scholarship to get additional training at Penn Dental Medicine. Her plan was return to her home country to practice and teach.

After the general practice residency, Dr. Navazesh continued on with a two-year oral medicine residency here at Penn Dental as well. Then, in 1979, the Shah of Iran was overthrown and Islamic cleric Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. Almost overnight, strict religious dictates were enforced and Iranian life was in turmoil. In November 1979, Iranian students stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, eventually holding 52 Americans hostage for 444 days.

Dr. Navazesh, who had left her parents and three sisters behind in Iran, never returned to her home country. "When I left home, I thought I would be gone for 12 months," she recalls. "I never thought almost 40 years later I would still be in this country."

In the early years after the revolution, she struggled. She lost her scholarship funding from the Iranian government and feared she would be deported back to Iran. Dr. Navazesh decided it was critical that she gain the credentials needed to practice dentistry in the U.S. Through an early version of Penn Dental Medicine's Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS), which was formally established in 1986, she received her DMD degree with the Class of 1983.

"It was a very stressful part of my life, overnight my country was gone, my funding taken away and you have to survive," she says. "When the hostages were taken, the atmosphere was not as friendly outside, but Penn was like home to us. I'm very grateful for the education I received there, and worked very hard day and night to continue. I loved the people there and enjoyed what I was doing, it gave me the power to keep going on."

At Penn Dental Medicine, from 1981 to 1985 she was Clinical Assistant Professor and Research Assistant Professor in the Department of Oral Medicine and, because of her research interest in salivary function, she also spent time as a research associate at nearby Monell Chemical Senses Center.

In 1983, Dr. Navazesh was selected as the first dentist to receive a Clinical Associate Physician Fellowship from the National Institutes of Health.

Meanwhile, by the mid-1980s, most of her family had managed to leave Iran for Southern California, and her heart was pulling her west. "My immediate family was all here, and I needed to do my best to create a new opportunity and home," she says. After a challenging 18 months preparing for the state boards, in 1987 she received her license and accepted a tenure-track position at USC.

In California, she married and raised two daughters, now 23 and 26. Although her path was not what she expected when she left Iran in 1977, she is grateful for the opportunity Penn Dental Medicine gave her to start a new life in the U.S. "The opportunity to earn my DMD from Penn was priceless," she says.



Swapnil Mahendrakar (D'16) From India & the U.S. Army to Penn Dental Medicine

Swapnil Mahendrakar (D'16) says she likes a challenge, but that may be an understatement. After two years of practicing dentistry in her home country of India, she left for graduate studies in health administration and business in Texas. She worked three jobs to support herself while completing both degrees in less than two years, and during this time, she also met and married her husband.

From there, her life took another unusual turn: she joined the U.S. military through a special recruiting program, Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest, that allows legal non-citizens with in-demand skills to join the Army. The program also allows for expedited U.S. citizenship.

After training at bases in Oklahoma and San Antonio, Dr. Mahendrakar served as a Special Forces combat medic in Fort Bragg, N.C., the first woman in her unit to do so. She worked on deployment training, preparing others to go into battle, teaching them to provide medical care on the battlefield, and running prisoner-of-war camp simulations to work through capture scenarios. Along with her daily responsibilities, she spent time with the dentist who served the base.

"I've always been on the adventurous side, but never had much chance in India," Dr. Mahendrakar says. For her family, it was strange enough that she left her dental career in India to attend graduate school in America, but they were truly left shaking their heads when she joined the Army. Of her service, though, she says, "I loved every moment: the challenges, proving yourself every day, overcoming fears. And I made great friends."

By the time her four-year military stint ended in 2014, she was a U.S. citizen, married and pregnant and had been accepted to Penn Dental Medicine's Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS), which would enable her to practice in her new country. Another benefit of her service — she was eligible for scholarship assistance through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' Yellow Ribbon program.

Penn Dental Medicine was her first choice. "Penn has everything: a well-structured program, an awesome clinical experience, international recognition — to get into Penn is such a big thing for almost every international student," she says. In addition, she says, "the full integration of PASS students into the rest of the class is so important."

She entered the program in March 2014 and her daughter, Anaya, was born in July, fortuitously coinciding with the break between third and fourth year. With help from her mother and mother-in-law, who alternated coming from India to help care for the baby,

Dr. Mahendrakar kept up the demanding pace of completing her dental education.

Coming back to dentistry after an eight-year hiatus was challenging. In addition to new technology and equipment, she found the practice of dentistry in the U.S. quite different from that in India, including more paperwork and better-informed patients. Once she started the program, however, "it felt like *déjà vu*," she recalls. "The scariest part is you know you have to start from scratch, but it was a challenge and I love challenges."

After she graduates in May, Dr. Mahendrakar will enter a two-year pediatric residency program at Yale School of Medicine. In another stroke of good timing, she is due to give birth to her second child, a boy, in June, just before her residency starts.

Although the growing family, including the dog, will leave Philadelphia for the two years of her residency, she and her husband Lokesh, a physician, plan to keep their home here and return when she is done. Ultimately, she hopes to work part-time in private practice and teach at Penn Dental Medicine.

And never one to turn from a challenge, Dr. Mahendrakar says she would like to serve again in the military. "In India, I was expected to get married and settle down," she says. "How many women from there get an opportunity to join the U.S. Army and do something different with their lives?" ■

— By Debbie Goldberg

Celebrating, Connecting PASS Alumni

At Alumni Weekend 2016, Penn Dental Medicine will be celebrating with Program for Advanced Standing Students (PASS) alumni to mark the 30th Anniversary of the official PASS program. A special dinner is planned on Friday, May 13, to recognize the program and the achievements of its graduates. For PASS alumni unable to return for this special gathering, we'd like to hear from you — let us know where your post-Penn Dental Medicine path has led and we can share your news with fellow alumni in the next *Penn Dental Medicine Journal*. Contact alumnifedback@dental.upenn.edu or 215-898-8951.