

# ALUMNI HIGHLIGHTS

## PROFILES, GATHERINGS & ENGAGEMENT

### Alumni Profile: Dr. Kendra Schaefer (D'95) *Making Her Mark in Prosthodontics*

The elderly Mexican woman who came to see Dr. Kendra Schaefer (D'95) in her Madison, WI, prosthodontic practice had a single goal: Get her denture fixed so she could get a job.

"She had come to Madison to care for family, and without income, she had no way to care for her partial denture, which she had glued together numerous times," explains Dr. Schaefer. "I did her work for free, simply because that was the only thing standing in her way of self-sufficiency."

Dr. Schaefer sees her goal in life as giving back – sharing her knowledge with dental students, providing a good job for an expanding number of employees in her practice, delivering compassionate and expert prosthodontic care to her patients, and helping to shape the practice of dentistry.

"I wake up each day thinking 'I get to do this today.' My job isn't something I have to do. It's something I want to do and it brings me joy," she says.

#### **GROWING A TRUSTED COMMUNITY PRACTICE**

Dr. Schaefer moved to Madison to purchase her dental practice in 2010. Since then, she has devoted her time to growing her practice and establishing a workplace that employees value and patients appreciate. She presently has a team of 10 in her practice.

"What probably distinguishes us from other practices is that we like to have fun and we really enjoy working together," says Dr. Schaefer. "Twice in one week we had patients ask if they could come work here because they could tell how much we enjoyed each other."

That's high praise, considering the demographic typical in prosthodontics. More than 35 million Americans do not have any teeth and 178 million are missing at least one tooth, according to data from the American College of Prosthodontists. That tooth loss, from decay and gum disease or as a result of cancer, injury, or



wear, often affects the most vulnerable populations: the aging and economically disadvantaged.

"Our patients typically haven't been to a dentist in a long time and are fearful. In addition, their edentulism keeps them from eating well and affects their ability to socialize," she explains. "It's important that the atmosphere in this practice is one that puts people at ease, breaks down barriers, and builds trust."

#### **DEEP ROOTS AT PENN DENTAL MEDICINE**

Prior to establishing her practice in Madison, Dr. Schaefer was appointed to faculty and hospital positions at Penn Dental Medicine and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.

"I really enjoyed my time at Penn, both as a student and as a faculty member," she says. "Penn and Philadelphia were a good fit for me." After earning her DMD at Penn Dental Medicine and completing her postgraduate work in prosthodontics at the University of Connecticut and a one-year fellowship in maxillofacial prosthetics at U.C.L.A., she returned to Penn Dental Medicine for a faculty position in the Department of Oral Surgery/Pharmacology. There she worked with patients after cancer

surgery to restore facial and oral structures lost to the disease, like the roof of the mouth, soft palate or other facial prosthetics.

"It's interesting to think back about my decision to go to dental school," she explains. "I liked the idea of medicine, but didn't want to be involved with people who were critically ill or dying. Then I became attracted to maxillofacial prosthodontics and cared for people who had head and neck cancer."

Dr. Schaefer found she had a natural talent for caring for those who underwent cancer surgery. "I was their counselor, their doctor, their friend — a little bit of everything," she says. "I spent a lot of time with my patients and got to know them and their families. Now, seven years after leaving Philadelphia, I still get cards and phone calls from my patients at Penn."

#### **MAKING TIME FOR WHAT'S IMPORTANT**

Her practice and her responsibilities keep her busy enough, but she makes time to be involved in three professional undertakings important to her: philanthropic outreach, teaching and mentoring, and political activism. Dr. Schaefer volunteers with a number of different groups including the ACP in Native American communities in Oklahoma and Wyoming; Operation Smile in Nairobi, Kenya; Medical Ministry International in Honduras; and Touched Twice Dental and the Wisconsin Dental Association's Mission of Mercy. She also participates in several leadership and study groups and teaches and lectures by invitation.

"My near-term goals are to hire an associate and expand my practice as well as travel more on missions," she says. "But I am really involved in organized dentistry and the political aspects of our profession."

She is especially concerned that more dental students are graduating without the opportunities to open or join a practice, going to work for dental corporations instead. "We need to find ways to help these students join or start practices, and in doing so, we'll maintain our identity as long-term care providers and anchors in our communities." ■