Translating Research to Better Oral Health

$67-Million Grant Paves the Way
Dean’s Message

All of us at the UAB School of Dentistry are excited to share how we foster a top-notch environment of learning where excellence in patient care and oral health research is the key outcome.

We continue to train excellent students at the highest level of hands-on didactic and scientific education, graduating outstanding practitioners and researchers. Through a strong new strategic plan, we’re promoting brand excellence and nurturing a unity of purpose in which faculty, staff, and students alike strive to make the school an ever-better place to work. As we continue to refine the school’s future using a proven business organization model, our stories of innovative strategies, excellence in research, and patient-centered care will illustrate our evolving leadership in oral health care.

Following in the movement toward implementation science, the UAB School of Dentistry has become a major leader with the National Dental Practice Based Research Network under the direction of our own Dr. Gregg Gilbert. This issue of UAB Dentistry will introduce you to Dr. Gilbert and the network, which focuses on dental care best practices and creates a win-win relationship between dental research and practice.

Central to our mission, research also serves as the scientific foundation of our clinical and teaching programs. This issue will introduce you to an outstanding faculty member, Dr. Nada Souccar, whose research benefits patients, especially older adults.

We’ll also acquaint you with a local alumna Dr. Jennifer Davis, whose family practice hosts students participating in our international student exchange program. You’ll meet a father and son, Dr. Gordon Isbell III and Ross Isbell, who are dedicated to the pursuit of continued dental education. And we’ll present the King family, three generations of dentists who, despite their different practice styles, share tremendous respect for one another.

Also in this issue, we profile the husband-and-wife dentistry team of Art Merkle and Carol Merkle. Carol Merkle was recently named president of the SOD Alumni Association. And in our “End Notes” section, we share a conversation with James L. Sanderson Jr. about his college days and distinguished career.

This issue highlights our recent strategic accomplishments, including the development of a new Department of Restorative Sciences, the transformation of a student lab to digital technology, and exciting new branding and patient-centered initiatives.

And finally, we travel to the historic town of Pine Apple, where a 2012 dental alumna, Dr. Melissa Nix, built French exchange students. Carol Merkle has been named president of the SOD Alumni Association.

Moving Forward: Dentistry’s strategic plan stays on track.

Advanced Renovation: Oral Arts Dental Laboratories updates third-floor student lab.

Partnership Between Schools: Public Health and Dentistry join forces to help the underserved in Wilcox County.

Sincerely,
Dean, School of Dentistry
Kay Shaw was an elementary-school student in Oakman, Alabama, when she first began giving some thought to her eventual career. “Two things I knew for certain,” she recalls, “were that I liked working one-on-one with people and that I was good with my hands.” But she also knew of adults who were consumed by their jobs, and she wanted a life with reasonable working hours and some control over her schedule.

“Dentistry seemed to be the perfect fit,” Shaw says, and since receiving her D.M.D. from the UAB School of Dentistry (UABSOD)—almost 30 years ago now—she’s never regretted it. She especially likes the continuity of treating multiple generations of the same family, in the storybook town of Fairhope on Alabama’s scenic Gulf Coast. There’s only one drawback, she says. “Sometimes the isolation makes you feel a little like the Lone Ranger. We don’t have the chance to interact with our colleagues as much as we’d like.”

“And believe it or not, even after 29 years,” she adds with a laugh, “I don’t know everything there is to know about dentistry.”

But thanks to a new initiative headquartered at UAB, Shaw and other practicing dentists from Oregon to Florida and points between will have opportunities to collaborate on clinical research projects at a scale that would not have been possible in the days before the Internet. Known as the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network, the effort also represents the largest grant in the school’s history: a seven-year outreach totaling $66.8 million, sponsored by the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), a part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

**BRIDGING BARRIERS, ANSWERING QUESTIONS**

Principal investigator Gregg Gilbert, D.D.S., M.B.A., professor and chair of the UAB Department of Clinical and Community Sciences, describes the network as “a unique investigative union of real-world practicing dentists and academic scientists. We hope to improve the nation’s oral health by increasing the knowledge base for clinical decision-making and moving the latest evidence into routine care.”

“Dentists in private practice are able to propose and participate in research studies that address the specific issues they face treating patients. So the network is designed to engage the end-user—dentists and other dental professionals—from the outset.”

Gilbert adds that both general dentists and specialists are active participants in order to make the project’s perspective as broad as possible. Community practitioners are involved at each step of the process, including authoring articles for peer-reviewed journals and making presentations at national meetings.

A look at the group’s Web site shows a wealth of research topics already in the works, ranging from “Persistent Pain and Root Canal Therapy” to “Assessing Outcomes of Cracked Teeth.”

“The whole purpose of the network is to help answer the kinds of questions that arise in an everyday dental practice,” says Sonia Makhija, D.D.S., M.P.H., associate professor of behavioral and population sciences in the UAB Department of Clinical and Community Sciences and director of communications and dissemination for the network. “Because so many dentists work solo, they’re often not aware of what everybody else is doing.”

“One example is a study we did of questionable lesions—a spot on the tooth that you’re not sure initially is a cavity or is something else,” she says. “For whatever reason, there had never been a study of just how frequently these lesions are seen in dental visits, and it turned out to be somewhere around a third of the time, which is a very high prevalence.”

“When the tooth was opened to put in a filling, about half ended up as cavities so small they could have been prevented without opening the tooth. So one thing we learned is to think twice about opening a tooth because that can impact the life cycle of the tooth, sometimes requiring bigger fillings.”

“So we’ve tried to change the behavior from a traditional response of ‘drill-and-fill’ to really monitoring and doing an ongoing risk assessment of the patient—considering whether a patient’s diet is high in sugar, whether they live in a fluoridated area, how regularly they come in for cleanings, and so on.”

The understanding the researchers gain will directly help patients by reducing both their fears and the amount of money they have to invest in maintaining the health of their teeth. “The evidence is showing that the more regularly they visit,” Makhija says, “the less likely they’ll require fillings. So patients might be spending a little more in the short run to get cleanings, but will pay less in the long run by not having to have the tooth taken out. So that’s a message we’re trying to communicate not just to dental professionals but to patients as well.”
UAB AT THE HUB

The NIDCR launched its first practice-based initiative in 2005, supporting three regional networks—including one at UAB—each with its own affiliated practitioners, administrative setups, and clinical studies. The effort’s new incarnation, headquartered at UAB, leads and oversees six smaller regional research centers located in Birmingham; San Antonio, Texas; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Portland, Oregon; Rochester, New York; and Gainesville, Florida. NIDCR Director Martha Somerman, D.D.S., Ph.D., says the coordination of the resulting “hub-and-spoke” structure “should free up those at the regional sites to focus almost solely on research, creating an excellent structure ‘should free up those at the regional sites to focus almost solely on research, creating an excellent opportunity for everyone.”

Dean Michael Reddy, D.M.D., M.D.Sc., agrees. “This network gives the people providing the bulk of dental care a voice in the science behind patient care. And we’re thrilled that the UAB School of Dentistry has been selected to lead this important national research effort.”

“Through it,” he continues, “we’re poised to transform oral health and dental education and be a model for all health-care education—which I firmly believe will change the practices of the future.”

“Our profession has a really good starting base of knowledge,” says UABSOD alumni Gerald Anderson, D.M.D., who practices in his hometown of Selma, Alabama. “But we know there are always better ways of doing anything, whether it’s new materials or new techniques. So it’s important for us to keep getting better at recognizing what patients want and delivering the care they need and expect.”

It was during Anderson’s undergraduate days at Samford University in Birmingham that he began doing volunteer work with dentists in underserved areas and decided to enter the profession himself. Some of his past research, before becoming involved with the National Dental Practice-Based Research Network, includes how best to refine decision-making about when to place a restoration, whichrestorative materials to use, and how well various materials hold up with the passing of time.

“To me, the most satisfying part of my practice is building relationships,” Anderson says. “I was fortunate as a kid never to have a fear of dentists. I actually enjoyed going to get my teeth cleaned. So it’s good to be able to pass that confidence along—to take a patient who might be scared or who has had a negative dental experience and help them become more at ease. Almost every day when I’m giving an injection, the patient will say something like, ‘I can’t believe that shot didn’t even hurt.’

“One of our biggest challenges is getting patients to understand the importance of routine preventive care and of saving teeth. Despite all the breakthroughs, there’s still a large portion of people who only go to a dentist in crisis situations.”

PATIENTS EAGER TO PARTICIPATE

One common thread reported by dentists is the eagerness of patients to sign up as participants in the various network studies. “When my patients hear about the list of research projects they’re eligible for, they’re very responsive,” says Shaw. “They seem excited that they can be a part of this important effort on a national scale and that NIH is involved. They realize that it’s something bigger than just a trip to the dentist.”

In her communications role for the network, Makkha surveys both patients and dentists who have participated in studies. She reports a high rate of satisfaction among both groups. “Practitioners receive printouts of their findings, which they can then compare with other professional participants across the state and throughout the nation.”

Studies have shown that the time lag between lab research, clinical trials, and implementing results into common practice averages anywhere from 14 to 17 years.”

Makkha says. “We hope that, for a host of reasons, the network can help bypass a lot of those delays and get information out to practicing dentists and their patients much sooner.”

“The great thing about the electronic age is that it allows us to more rapidly dispense this knowledge throughout the network,” Reddy says.

“Best case,” he continues, “we’d like to see two things happen long-term: improved oral health for the nation and the world, by addressing problems that are most relevant to practitioners, and a fundamental change in the rate at which improvements in health care move forward from discovery to transmission.”

The network’s bottom-line potential, Gilbert says, is that it “offers a different approach from anything done before. Academicians aren’t telling community practitioners what to do; rather, this is the nation’s network tapping into the immense amount of practical clinical expertise that already resides in the community.”

“We want all of the key stakeholders to join us in the excitement of research discovery and continuous quality improvement for the benefit of all patients.”

Network findings will be communicated to dentistry students through classes and community rotations to external clinical sites, including enhancement experiences in pediatric dentistry and a program known as SEARCH (Students/Residents Experiences and Rotations in Community Health), which is housed in the Division of Behavioral and Population Sciences and headed by Conan Davis, D.M.D., M.P.H.

And while continual breakthroughs in diagnostic imaging and dental materials usher in a new world of options and precision for fields such as restorative dentistry, much of current research keeps amplifying the message ushered in by the fluoridation revolution decades ago: the old aphorism about an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure.

“Fluoride has helped in so many ways, and prevention is still a very big part of our focus,” says Makkha. “One example is a network study conducted in Denmark, where deep cavities were sealed to stop their progression and avoid putting in fillings. The trend is toward smaller fillings, and only when the area is big enough to be really necessary. Of course, the ultimate goal is to prevent cavities in the first place by monitoring patients and effectively communicating to them the importance of oral hygiene.”
Moving Forward

Dentistry's Strategic Plan Stays on Track

DEAN MICHAEL REDDY's strategic plan for UAB Dentistry continues to unfold with involvement from faculty, staff, and students. James Broome, D.D.S., professor, Department of Restorative Sciences, says the plan revolves around three critical areas: increasing institutional effectiveness, enhancing UAB Dentistry's culture, and improving the patient experience.

Broome notes that having satisfied patients depends on having a way to identify their areas of concern. “That’s what patient surveys are for,” he says. “We are doing a full-court press to enhance that information-gathering effort. We’ve also turned our attention to improving the distribution of surveys. Then, of course, we must have a reporting system to address issues that patients raise. So we are now working on our services-recovery process to keep patients engaged with the school’s clinics. If there’s a specific patient complaint, we want to make it right and not repeat the mistake.”

Easily interpreted one-page data sheets are generated from patient surveys to alert clinic chairs and directors on where their particular areas stand in patient satisfaction. “Clinical personnel are now e-mailing me with notes on how they have corrected problems, which is very helpful,” Broome says. “The good news is that when we look at patients’ responses, two-thirds of the comments are consistently positive, which is pretty remarkable. We are currently looking at shortening the time between when a patient is treated and surveyed by using tablet computers such as iPads.”

ADDRESSING ISSUES

One of the biggest patient complaints is parking—or the lack thereof. UAB Dentistry is addressing that long-standing complaint head-on by negotiating with the UAB administration and the city of Birmingham to have the metered parking places in front of the clinics reserved exclusively for use by dentistry patients. “There will be a kiosk near the entrance to the UAB Dentistry clinic where patients will be given a placard to place on their dashboards,” says Kiran Chavali, D.M.D., assistant professor in prosthodontics, who is leading the way on expanding parking possibilities for patients. He says that valet parking also is a future possibility.

Another novel idea introduced by Steve Filler, D.M.D., has students stationed at the main entrance to the clinic during operating hours to welcome patients inside. Greeting patients conveys a sense of caring and provides good public-relations training for students planning to establish private practices, Filler says.

Reddy also has created a new position—associate dean for patient success—and named former SOD prosthodontics chair Sandra Jean O’Neal, D.M.D., to that position. “Dr. O’Neal is very well respected for her leadership and clinical skills,” Broome says. “She’s back part-time to focus on what’s needed to enhance the patient experience.”

UAB Dentistry is considering implementing AIDET (Acknowledge, Introduce, Duration, Explanation, Thank You), a patient-communication program that UAB’s Kirklin Clinic has implemented with great success. “AIDET provides a framework for us to keep in mind how patients really want to be treated,” Broome says.

BRAND EXCELLENCE

Ginger Hattaway, director of administrative and fiscal affairs, has taken the lead on marketing UAB Dentistry within the UAB community. “As part of the strategic plan, we identified critical issues that needed immediate action, and branding was one of those issues,” Hattaway explains. “From there, we engaged faculty and staff in the process as volunteers on projects. Through this process, we developed our committees. Dr. Mary MacDougall (Ph.D.) and I co-chair the branding committee, and our fellow team members are Amanda Carballo, who works in the dean’s office, Dr. Steve Mitchell (D.M.D.), and Dr. Toni Neumeier (D.M.D.).”

“As the branding committee, we realized that many people on campus are totally unaware of who we are and what we do,” she says. “So we want to create a stronger identity within the university and medical center to let people know that we are a vibrant dental clinic serving Alabama and beyond.”

UAB Dentistry’s branding effort extends even to the type of scrubs worn within the clinics. “Both faculty and students wear green scrubs, but faculty members also wear identifying white coats,” Hattaway says. "Students' scrubs bear their names and graduation year. Clinic staff members wear black scrubs so that patients can easily distinguish between faculty and staff.” Hattaway says that future branding efforts will include updated brochures and other promotional materials as well as street banners outside the school. There’s even a plan to create computer mouse pads inscribed with the school’s mission, values, and goals.

“We are passionate about branding and creating a new image and culture,” Hattaway says. “An overriding goal of the strategic plan is to continually improve the image of UAB Dentistry. We want to make it the best patient experience that people can have when they walk into the building.”
Oral Arts understands that, too, and we have completely modernized that the future of dentistry lies in technology. Matt Winstead says, “It also was a good fit because Dr. Reddy recognizes that access to dental care topped respondents’ concerns. Waterbor approached Conan Davis, D.M.D., M.P.H., associate professor of behavioral and population sciences and director of UAB’s community collaboration, to see if the two schools could work together to address the problem.

“During our initial investigation, we visited the Pine Apple Health Center,” Waterbor says, “which had some extra exam room space with two dental chairs, supplies, and dental equipment, including an X-ray machine that had been donated to the clinic. Some of the supplies were expired and had to be discarded, but the equipment and the infrastructure were all there; the only thing we didn’t have was a dentist.”

Enter Timothy Smith, D.M.D., a 2012 graduate of UAB’s School of Dentistry (UABSOD). Smith, the son of a minister, says that he used to joke with a classmate in his preclinical lab days that he wanted to go where he was needed. “So I would tease him and say that I would be practicing dentistry in ‘Hog Chain, Alabama,’” he recalls. “Throughout dental school, I’d say, ‘I’m getting ready for my practice in Hog Chain.’ As it turns out, I’m working on starting a practice in Alabama, where he works Monday through Wednesday. Last fall, Smith, who is now an adjunct UABSOD faculty member, traveled from Eutaw to Pine Apple each Thursday to see low-income patients at the health clinic there. “I’m so excited about that,” Smith says. “I also work part-time in the geriatric rotation at Fair Haven Nursing Home in Birmingham, which is part of the dental school’s regular rotation for students. I work there with Dr. Lillian Mitchell, and I love the geriatric aspect of dentistry. That’s another thing that’s so terribly satisfying. And it’s very personal to me, because all of us are going to pass through that stage of our lives—if we’re lucky enough. And there is a big element of geriatric care in rural communities such as Pine Apple, so I’m looking forward to having the students out here.”

Waterbor’s small grant has now ended, but interest in providing dental care to the residents of Wilson County remains. Davis says that a funding proposal has been submitted that would help sustain the part-time dental clinic in Pine Apple and offer some travel funding to allow senior dental students to rotate there through a voluntary externship program. In addition, Davis and Waterbor recently met with Robert Jackson, CEO of Alabama’s Rural Health Medical Program Inc., to discuss ways in which UAB can work with him to continue to provide dental care to the underserved residents of the Black Belt.
Reinventing and Restructuring
Restorative Sciences Rises to the Challenge

PERNG-RU LIU, D.D.S., M.S., D.M.D.; finds serving as chair of the School of Dentistry’s Department of Restorative Sciences both rewarding and challenging. “This is a critical time for UAB Dentistry, and, like many organizations, it’s important that we use our limited resources in the most effective and efficient ways,” says Liu, a graduate of Chung-Shan Medical University, Taiwan, and the UAB School of Dentistry (UABSD). “The restructuring related to the establishment of the Department of Restorative Sciences is the culmination of strategic planning goals to seek more efficient ways to fulfill the school’s mission. That includes pooling the resources and combining the personnel of the general dentistry and prosthodontics faculty.”

The newly formed department encompasses six cohort groups with one unified mission—to form symbiotic relationships that will enhance and strengthen the efforts of the entire department. “In the short term, we plan to focus on elevating the student and resident learning experience by providing excellent patient service,” Liu says. “Our long-term goal is to lead oral health care at the national and international levels.”

Daniel Givan, D.M.D., serves as the department’s associate chair and leads the Division of Prosthodontics; he says that by creating this new division, the overall effectiveness of the department is enhanced. “The prosthodontics faculty and their teaching programs have been moved under a single administrative structure without departmental barriers,” he says. “The curriculum, assignment of faculty schedules, and the supporting resources are coordinated with greater ease, improving our teaching and scholarly activities.

“Within this structure, the undergraduate prosthodontics faculty have a greater interchange with the graduate residencies and faculty for better vertical integration, which is especially beneficial to complex patient care,” he continues. “Finally, this restructuring has allowed for a greater number of our faculty to take leadership roles within the division with strong peer support of the entire prosthodontics team, which will enable our faculty to strengthen their effectiveness and grow professionally.

“By utilizing the strengths of the graduate programs—as well as a diverse faculty—efforts to remain current in the ever-changing world of prosthodontics have been implemented. This is essential to structuring our future academic undergraduate programs. For example, with the advent of digital dentistry, computer-aided designs, and digital impression systems as we explore the innovative materials and techniques that tomorrow’s dentists will use.”

SHAPING DENTISTRY’S FUTURE

As the head of the Division of General Dentistry, Sonya Mitchell, D.M.D., M.S.H.A., oversees the primary undergraduate clinics involved in providing clinical training in general dentistry. She works with the various clinic directors, clinical staff, and the school’s administration to improve the patient experience and provide excellence in patient care.

“The organizational restructuring has impacted pre-doctoral general dentistry foremost through realigning the oversight of the undergraduate prosthodontics curriculum,” says Mitchell, who has served as an associate professor and division head of general dentistry for three years. “The Division of General Dentistry remains unchanged except for that curricular realignment.”

For Mitchell, team dynamics remain a crucial component within the division. “Trust is extremely important in any team,” she says. “Everyone involved plays a role, regardless of the function. All members of the team are needed and possess unique qualities that only they bring.

“I am excited to be part of the restructuring,” Mitchell says, “because I can have a direct impact on the future of excellence at the school. And I am proud to work at an institution with a long history of achievement.”

To be part of the restructuring process is to be part of the future of oral health care in Alabama. The school’s faculty is passionate about educating the dental health-care leaders of tomorrow.”

NADA SOUCCAR, D.D.S., M.S., became intrigued with imaging techniques in 2011, when she joined the faculty of the UAB Department of Orthodontics and began working with department chair Chung How Kau, D.M.D., M.Sc.D., Ph.D.

“Dr. Kau’s research interests include the establishment of facial norms for different population groups,” Souccar says. “My own research focuses on aging of the face. One in five orthodontic patients is an adult, making 3D surface imaging particularly relevant in evaluating the effects of time on the soft tissues of the face.”

Surface imaging, a photographic imaging technique, improves on the flat appearance of regular photographs by adding depth to an image. Standard photographs are two-dimensional documents that show only the height and widths of a given object. Three-dimensional imaging, on the other hand, can capture the volume of an object, display it on a computer screen, and let the user manipulate it in all dimensions of space.

“Another important aspect of this process is the ability to merge surface imaging with other 3D records such as cone beam computed tomography and digital models of the teeth to reconstruct the head as a volume layer by layer,” Souccar says.

Souccar received her dental degree and orthodontic certification in Lebanon, where she worked in private practice for three years before moving to the United States. “The advanced technology that is now available makes this is a very exciting time to be in dentistry,” she says, “and the School of Dentistry has chosen to be a part of this change and make the best use of it for the benefit of our students and patients.”

Research That Benefits Patients and Populations

“One in five orthodontic patients is an adult, making 3D surface imaging particularly relevant in evaluating the effects of time on the soft tissues of the face.”

Cindy Riley
Serving the Underserved
UAB DENTAL STUDENTS MEET THE CHALLENGE

(Charles McIn is five when she went for her first dental checkup. It was a visit that she will never forget. “It was immediately intriguing by the tongue-shaped chair, odd-looking instruments, and spinning toothbrush,” she says. “It was at that moment that I knew I would become a dentist.”

Now a student at the UABSOD, McIn is fulfilling her early childhood ambition. She’s also serving as president of the UAB chapter of the Student National Dental Association (SNDA), where one of her primary objectives is to ensure that vision and mission of SNDA is fulfilled through community-service outreach—a goal near and dear to her heart.

McIn also works with a local “impressions program,” which is designed to increase the number of minority dentists by providing pre-dental students with hands-on exposure to dental specialties and procedures. After graduation in 2014, she hopes to establish a practice in general dentistry while improving access to dental services for low-income individuals.

CHARLES McIN

Learning by Example
Hugh Ogletree’s interest in dentistry dates to his childhood. “I grew up in my father’s general dentistry office in Phenix City, Alabama,” says Ogletree, who is vice president of SNDA. “But I didn’t understand the significance of my father’s profession until I was in second grade. That’s when my grandfather took out his set of dentures and explained that my father had made them for him. He gently told me that fixing teeth so a person could eat and speak normally was how my dad helped people.”

Now that he’s an officer in SNDA, Ogletree’s responsibilities extend beyond his studies to include community involvement, fund-raising, and recruiting new members.

“After graduation,” he says, “I would like to work in private practice. However, my long-term goal is to become a legislative voice for dentistry at the federal level.”

Managing Money
Kevin Sandifer, who hails from Huntsville, Alabama, serves as SNDA treasurer. He says dentistry fits his personality. “I love to help people,” he says. “I also wanted a challenging career that would allow me to do different things on a daily basis so that my work never becomes routine.”

One of the rewards of being an SNDA officer, he says, is seeing the membership grow since he joined the organization in 2010.

“My student experiences have taught me a great deal,” says Sandifer, whose short-term career goal is to become as competent and efficient a dentist as possible. “My long-term career goals include prevention measures such as educating people about the importance of good daily oral hygiene.”

The Importance of History
As historian of UAB’s chapter of SNDA, DeShayda Mackey’s official responsibility is to keep a record of members events. “My personal goal,” she says, “is understanding where we’ve come from historically in order to envision and communicate what we want to achieve in the future. It’s my job to relay that information to my fellow officers so that we can brainstorm as a team to make our goals come to fruition.”

“My experiences as a student dentist have been challenging,” says Mackey, who is from Plant City, Florida. “Having worked with patients in the dental clinic on a daily basis, I prefer completing treatments and learning the mechanical side of dentistry in a live-patient setting. I’m learning toward doing a general practice residency or an associatehip before starting my own practice.”

Regardless of their eventual career paths, the 2012-13 UAB officers of the SNDA plan to continue working to improve access to care within underserved communities and advancing minorities within the field of dentistry.

Now More Than Ever, philanthropic support is important to the future of the UAB School of Dentistry, says Scott Huffmann, director of development. That’s why Huffmann was delighted last spring to meet a group of students from the Class of 2014 committed to participating in a giving program that will set a precedent for all future classes.

“The 2014 class is the first to participate in the new student-giving program,” he says. “Members of this class understood that the school receives less than 25 percent of its total budget from state appropriations and that private dollars help maintain the school’s high standards in training dentists and providing patient care.”

“Dean Michael Reddy wanted to establish a giving program specifically geared to students,” Huffmann explains. “The dean has implemented several programs designed to improve the student experience at the SOOD, and he wants to raise students’ awareness of the need for philanthropic support that will fund future enhancement programs.”

Huffmann says the amount each student gives isn’t important. “What is relevant is that this class is setting the tone for future classes,” he says. “These students will help build a contagious culture of philanthropy at our school. Other students, alumni, faculty, and staff will see and be inspired by their generosity.”

Setting up a giving program also helps students develop the habit of giving so that when they become alumni, they will be well versed in both the needs of students and the school overall. “We want the class-giving program to permeate the school,” Huffmann says, “to extend to all classes, faculty, and staff.”

The contributions from this first class gift will be used to benefit all current students, according to Huffmann. “Students might use the funds for travel to conferences or to purchase supplies for a class project. However they’re used, the dollars benefit them,” he says.

Culture of Giving
When he spoke with members of the Class of 2014, Huffmann outlined the decades-long culture of giving established at the school by alumni, friends, and organizations. He explained how current students have benefited from their predecessors’ gifts, including renovations to the facilities and endowed professorships and chairs, which strengthen students’ dental education.

“We also have an alumni class-giving program that allows classes holding reunions to use those opportunities to make gifts to the school,” Huffmann says. “Another benefit of establishing a student class gift is that it acts as a catalyst for the alumni classes participating in the reunion giving program.”

Stephen (Steve) Smith, president of the Class of 2014, believes he and his fellow students can change the perception of giving—from one of alumni donating money and resources to one of currently enrolled students taking pride not only in the funds they raise but also in how they’re used. “As a liaison between the class and our instructors and administration,” Smith says, “I’m an advocate for the entire class at all times, and I look out for everyone’s best interest. I think the SOOD ultimately wants to become the greatest dental school in the country. But at the same time, the school must continue graduating dentists while developing programs.”

Money raised through the Class of 2014 Fund will benefit the current class and later could be used to benefit all dental students.

“The fund has just recently been created, and we are moving toward setting our first monetary goal,” Smith says. “We’ve discussed different ways to use the initial funds we raise, hosting class lunches, or funding a service project in the future. The outcome is uncertain, but we will be reaching out to our peers, alumni, friends, and organizations to see how they would like us to use those opportunities to make gifts to the school.”

In addition to being a dental student, Smith serves in the United States Navy and hopes to one day treat sailors and their families. “Many of my classmates will be graduating with more than $100,000 in personal debt,” he says, “and it can be difficult for some to justify investing more money until we start earning money ourselves. Most of the feedback I’ve received is that people want to have a goal. It’s easier to give when there is something tangible to show for the gift. The culture of dentistry is by nature philanthropic, and one of the ways in which we can give back to the profession is to make the School of Dentistry even better for future students.”

Cindy Riley
Like Father, Like Daughter, Like Niece

**Family Practice Hosts Exchange Students**

Jennifer Davis, D.M.D., took some time off from her busy practice in Homewood, Alabama, to entertain—and help educate—two French dental students. The students were participating in the School of Dentistry’s international student exchange program and spent a week in Birmingham interacting with local dentists and students. The exchange provided a two-way learning experience about French and American approaches to dentistry.

“I think the international exchange programs are important in learning about the dentistry and dental education in other countries,” Davis says. “In France, students have to decide on career interests in high school. Their colleges and dental schools are combined, in that if you do well enough in your early studies at the university, you may be selected to progress into the dental school track. I think that establishing connections with dentists in other countries is invaluable. It is a good cultural experience for the students to learn about other countries and their way of life—to broaden one’s horizons.”

Davis practices with her niece, Melissa Nix, D.M.D., who graduated from the SOD in 2007. As a dental student, Nix participated in a student-exchange trip to Japan. During their day with the French students, Davis and Nix arranged for the visitors to spend the morning with oral surgeons Nevit Burton and David Roden. After lunch at a local restaurant, Davis and Nix hosted the students at their Edgewood office for the afternoon. “They were particularly interested in the concept of dental hygienists, since there apparently is no such career in France,” Davis says. “The dentists themselves do all of the dental cleanings as well as all of the dentistry.”

Her involvement with the recent international student-exchange program is characteristic of Davis, who has remained active with the SOD since her graduation in 1990. She and Nix regularly attend the annual Alumni Weekend and continuing education courses. Davis also serves as a facilitator with the annual Erthics Seminar for third- and fourth-year dental students.

**THREE GENERATIONS**

Davis has a long history in health care. Before she became a dentist, she worked as a nurse for 10 years in the neonatal intensive care unit at Children’s of Alabama. She holds a B.S.N. and M.S.N. in pediatric nursing from UAB and taught at the now-closed St. Vincent’s Hospital School of Nursing.

Leaving a career in nursing to enter the dental profession was tough, and we became very close to fellow classmates during that time,” Merkle says. “As alumni as possible ensures that we will be better able to support the school, the students, and the faculty in providing a solid education for Alabama’s dentists,” Merkle says. “During the past few years, the SOD’s dental oversight committee was formed to address concerns of both alumni and students regarding the direction of the school’s dental education. Some very positive changes have been accomplished, and under the leadership of Dean (Michael) Reddy, the clinical education of our students continues to improve. As alumni, we have every reason to be proud of our school.”

**STAYING INVOLVED**

The Merkles credit the UAB School of Dentistry with preparing them well for their respective careers. To show their appreciation, the couple actively participates in school alumni events. Indeed, Carol Merkle recently was named president of the SOD Alumni Association.

Her top priority as the new president will be to further expand the alumni association’s active membership. “Involving as many of our alumni as possible ensures that we will be better able to support the school, the students, and the faculty in providing a solid education for Alabama’s dentists,” Merkle says. “During the past few years, the SOD’s dental oversight committee was formed to address concerns of both alumni and students regarding the direction of the school’s dental education. Some very positive changes have been accomplished, and under the leadership of Dean (Michael) Reddy, the clinical education of our students continues to improve. As alumni, we have every reason to be proud of our school.”

**HONORING A MENTOR**

As students at the SOD, the Merkles built lasting friendships among fellow students with whom they shared common experiences. Those long-term relationships, in addition to their pride in the education they received, have provided the primary motivation for their continued involvement with the school. “Going through dental school was tough, and we became very close to fellow classmates during that time,” Merkle says. “As alumni, we have every reason to be proud of our school.”

**RETURNING TO WORK TOGETHER**

As dentists, the Merkles have found that working together creates a sense of teamwork. “It’s nice to run into each other at times throughout the work day, and Art is handy at fixing things around the office,” Carol Merkle says. “And in addition to sharing an understanding of work-related concerns that we might be undergoing, we can relate to each other on a professional level.”

“Perhaps even more important, I always know when he might be coming home in a bad mood,” she laughs.

Carole and Nancy are both involved with school as a tribute to one of their favorite teachers, the late Dr. David Greer. “I had so much love and respect for our beloved teacher and mentor that I have made it a point to be actively involved, as that is what he would have liked,” she says.

Among her favorite SOD memories are the times she spent with classmates and friends celebrating educational milestones such as passing important tests or making project deadlines. “Parties at the fraternities, postrural dinners with classmates, going to the Burly Earl or the Courtyard grill, and celebrations of weddings and babies were important events that helped us to break through the stress we all felt,” she says.

Nancy Mann Jackson

Family Practice Hosts Exchange Students

**THE HUSBAND AND WIFE**

Merkle and Merkle

Married to Dentistry and Each Other

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Building on Success

Father and Son Dedicated to Dentistry

GORDON ISBELL III, D.M.D.,
opened his dental practice in his hometown of Gadsden, Alabama, in 1981—the same year he graduated from the UAB School of Dentistry. His son, Gordon “Ross” Isbell IV, is currently enrolled at the UAB School of Dentistry. But regardless of graduation dates, neither Isbell will have finished with learning about dentistry. In fact, continuing education has been a way of life for the elder Isbell—and his son plans to follow in his footsteps. “The only way to practice with excellence is to continue learning,” Isbell III says. “Dentistry is evolving so rapidly that it’s easy to get left behind. Our patients deserve dentists who are on the cutting edge.”

Isbell was instrumental in launching the Academy of General Dentistry’s (AGD) Master’s Track program at UAB. This is a five-year continuing-education program that merits five times a year and features a 10-person roundtable. Isbell was a member of the first class in 1989 and says it was “the highlight of my continuing-education career. It was so hands-on, and there are great dentists in every class.”

Isbell also has served in various national leadership positions with the AGD and the American Dental Association. He finds it especially gratifying that today’s students, such as his son, are being encouraged from the very beginning of their careers as dentists to stay involved with learning through continuing-education classes. Last year, he was honored to see that 40 SOD students spent their spring break attending a professional development meeting on their own dime.

Ross Isbell is following in his father’s footsteps in another way—taking leadership roles in dental organizations. He’s slated to be the next president of the American Student Dental Association (ASDA). “My involvement in the ASDA has been very helpful, particularly in gaining experience in organizing dentistry meetings, which augments my current curriculum with continuing-education courses on special topics and allows me to interact with and learn from dentists at the top of the profession. And it has been a great fresh perspective on the size and scope of the larger dental world as well as a desire to stay involved to help protect my future profession.”

Isbell III points out that while his son “could have gone to other dental schools around the country,” he chose to come to UAB. “I’m very proud the SOD is a school that top students continue to choose,” he says. “When I speak at dentistry events across the country, people know our school is excellent. Every year, the SOD is ranked first, second, or third in the country. We have a tremendous school and faculty. Our graduates have a great foundation.”

NEVER STOP LEARNING

Building on that foundation with ongoing professional education is essential to furthering one’s career, Isbell III says. By doing so himself, he has been able to continue practicing cutting-edge dentistry for more than 30 years. “Continuing education has been my life because years ago Dr. Scotty McCallum told me that I should make it a priority,” he says. “Continuing education is the core of practice excellence in dentistry.”

Isbell’s ongoing involvement with the SOD helped Isbell IV make his decision to enroll at UAB after graduating from Washington and Lee University. “I felt familiar with the SOD campus and the alumni community supporting it, and I wanted to come home to be a part of it,” he says.

“Our plan to eventually practice together is a near-father-son thing in dentistry that’s quite unique,” Isbell III says. “And I’m proud we have a great dental school right here in Alabama.”

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Gordon R. Isbell III, president of the 2013 American Dental Political Action Committee (ADPAC), and Gordon “Ross” Isbell IV, an ADPAC student representative, attend the committee’s January meeting at the Georgia Dental Association headquarters in Atlanta.

Fathers and Sons

Three Generations of Dentists

YOU COULD SAY that dentistry runs in the family of Bill King Jr., D.M.D. King is the son of a dentist, and he has two sons, William King III, D.M.D., and Parrish King, D.M.D., both of whom are dentists. Father and sons are alumni of the UAB School of Dentistry.

The elder King and his father, William King Sr., who died in 1995 at age 77, shared the same Andalusia dentist practice for nearly 30 years. King Sr. was a graduate of the Georgia Southern Dental College, which is now Emory University.

“I don’t know what’s in our genes that we gravitate to dentistry,” says King, who graduated from the SOD in 1976. “When I look back on my dad’s career and life, it was just a caring, loving individual. He liked people, and dentistry is one of those professions where you find people with problems that need to be solved and you want to solve them. I certainly never told my children that they needed to become dentists. I think they just progressed that way, and I’m glad they did.”

King’s oldest son, William (Will), was in the 2004 graduating class. He now practices family dentistry in Auburn and is a member of the SOD Alumni Association. “I worked with my dad and granddad while I was in high school,” he says, “and that was a really great experience—just being able to see them together and watch my grandfather work. After finishing from UAB, I did a GPR (general practice residency) at the Birmingham VA Hospital. At that time, my dad was still working in my grandfather’s original office with his partner Dr. Burkhardt, so there really wasn’t room for a third practitioner. With all of us having gone to Auburn University for undergraduate studies, I just kind of gravitated back here. However, I do work with my father and brother at our office one or two Fridays each month. That is something I look forward to and is an experience I truly enjoy.”

Parrish King, who is winner of the 2012 Outstanding Young Alumni Award and a member of the UAB Dentistry Leadership Council, says that while growing up he wasn’t sure he wanted to be a dentist. In fact, he almost became an engineer. “My brother, who is three years older, always planned to be a dentist,” says King, “and since my grandfather and my dad were dentists, I figured that they had that profession covered.” Instead, he studied biomedical sciences at Auburn University with the idea of becoming a dental veterinarian. But, eventually, he opted to become a dentist and study at the UAB SOD.

Parrish King knew that he wanted to practice with his father in Andalusia, but he wanted to bring his own set of skills to the business. So, after graduation in 2007, he enrolled in an advanced education program at the university of Alabama to learn about dental implants before moving back to Andalusia.

Both father and son say they like working together. “Although we definitely have different practice styles,” Parrish King says, “we have a tremendous respect for one another and frequently ask each other for opinions on problem cases.” In addition to implants, King performs molar root canals, third molar removal surgery, and complex rehabilitation treatments. Bill King, whose practice includes a third dentist, says Parrish’s skills set has benefited the business. “He has brought a whole new dimension to the practice,” King says. “Procedures that we didn’t offer before, we’re now able to perform here in the office, which is really nice for our patients.”

Last January, Parrish and Bill King were tapped to become new members of the UAB School of Dentistry’s Leadership Council. “It was time to give back to the school,” says Bill King, “and the Leadership Council provides a great way to achieve that goal.” Through their leadership roles, the Kings are recruiting other dentists who will help support the school’s financial goals.

King Jr. says that since his oldest grandchild is only seven, it’s too soon to know whether there will be a fourth generation of dentists in the family. But when the Kings gather for holidays, dentistry is often the topic of discussion. “We talk teeth,” King says. “No one around us wants to hear it, but it’s just a natural thing—the two boys and dad talking teeth.”

Gail Allyn Short

Bill King Jr. (above, left) with son Robert Parrish King, winner of the 2012 Outstanding Young Alumni Award. Bill King’s oldest son, Will, who is not pictured, practices in Auburn, Alabama.
A conversation with

JAMES L. SANDERSON JR., D.M.D.

INTERVIEW BY GAIL ALLYN SHORT

Tell us about your father, the late J.L. Sanderson Sr., D.M.D.

As a teenager, James L. Sanderson Jr. said he had no intention of becoming a dentist like his father. Instead, he was planning a career in sports, and when he entered the University of Alabama, he worked as a student athletic trainer. Then, during his junior year, he met with former UAB president—and the first dean of the UAB School of Dentistry—Joseph F. Volker, D.D.S., Ph.D., who inspired him to choose a career in dentistry after all. Since graduating in 1984, Sanderson has maintained a practice, raised a family, and helped build a clinic in Eastern Europe.

What is your earliest memory of your father as a dentist?

I guess it was when getting a baby tooth taken out. Daddy was a very smooth, very gentle operator, so it wasn’t a bad experience at all.

Let’s turn to your college days at the University of Alabama. What were your duties as a student athletic trainer?

Well first, I was very fortunate to be selected as a student athletic trainer. I had already taken an EMT course. It wasn’t required, but you could if you wanted to—and I did. Dr. Powell created an environment where I could do that. I ended up doing about 100 crown prep while in school.

What do you enjoy most about dentistry?

I really enjoy diagnostic-enhanced, laser-assisted, comprehensive dentistry. We do a lot of reconstructive kinds of things, and I’ve recently added a microscope here in the office. I have always used magnification throughout my career and thought I was getting all that I needed, but the microscope is phenomenal.

What other changes have you seen in dentistry over the years?

We’ve dealt with 3D problems in dentistry since the beginning of time, but until recently we’ve only had X-ray, a two-dimensional evaluation tool. Today, cone-beam technology absolutely changes the way you can evaluate what a patient’s problems are. It’s just amazing to me—the difference it makes when you can look at something in a 3D view.

You are a member of the SOD Leadership Council. Why?

You need to have an influence wherever you can. I made me believe that I could have influence. And sure enough, if you’re willing to stick your neck out, you can.

What do you admire most about the Leadership Council?

From Coach Bryant, I learned the importance of mission and vision, which you must have to achieve your goals. When Dr. (Michael) Reddy came in as dean, that’s where he first went, toward mission and vision. He is champion of the school’s vision, and we can have a positive future. The council helps students to become professionals, and we need that. We need people to get out there and carry on the future.

Tell us about your family.

My wife, Katrina, was my high-school sweetheart. We went to different colleges, but got back together after I graduated from dental school. We now have three daughters. Our oldest, Sarah, is married now. Emily just graduated from the University of Alabama, and the youngest, Jill, is 17.

Looking back, what has been the highlight of your career?

Several years ago, my family and I joined The Church at Brook Hills and one day a fellow member called and asked if I wanted to go on a mission trip the next month. I said a month’s notice wouldn’t work for my practice but that if he wanted to talk about going on a mission trip a year from then, I would be interested. The church group was working with a foundation to establish a dental clinic in Las, Romania. I talked with some vendors about the goal of the mission and came away with commitments on everything we needed to put together a dental office. We set up a dental clinic and got it running. If I never go back, it doesn’t matter because they are seeing patients today and it’s working. That was in 2002, and Daddy went with me. That was the last time we worked together. It was a good time.

“I know the things that I was asking him to choose a career in medicine or dentistry or whatever. As a teenager, James L. Sanderson Jr. said he had no intention of becoming a dentist like his father. Instead, he was planning a career in sports, and when he entered the University of Alabama, he worked as a student athletic trainer. Then, during his junior year, he met with former UAB president—and the first dean of the UAB School of Dentistry—Joseph F. Volker, D.D.S., Ph.D., who inspired him to choose a career in dentistry after all. Since graduating in 1984, Sanderson has maintained a practice, raised a family, and helped build a clinic in Eastern Europe.

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### UAB School of Dentistry

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