

A Personal Retrospective

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Remembering my best day in optometric education brings tears to my eyes. My friends know I am emotional, but if you don't know me, let me introduce myself. I am a graduate of The New England College of Optometry, a second-generation optometrist and a late bloomer (I was 35 when I graduated in 1978), who has been adjunct faculty at NECO for 33 years. While my primary professional career has been in my own practice, and while that employment has been overwhelmingly rewarding, some of my best days ever have come from teaching at the College. As I contemplate retirement from both clinic and academia, I'm having fun looking back on those days and deciding which might have been the very best.

Chronologically, my first best day in optometric education had to be the day, when I was about 10, when my dad put an ophthalmoscope in my hand to let me look into my brother's eyes. Yes, my dad was my first optometry educator, and I was the one being educated, but I sensed his excitement as he explained that the red lines I saw were blood vessels and that the eye was the only place in the body where blood vessels could be seen without cutting into the skin(!). While my dad was always a model for me of caring, thoroughness and ethics in practice, some of the rewards of teaching became obvious to me that day. It was a day of not one, but two, "aha! moments."

The day I got my first student reviews was another best day for me. I love teaching for its own sake, but feedback from students is precious. When it's positive, it rewards us for our hard work and preparation, but, more importantly, feedback motivates us to

improve on our strengths and minimize our weaknesses as teachers. While words like "great," "helpful," and "effective" are flattering, the ones I was able to use most were specifics, like "organized," "attentive" and "mentor." My students' evaluations have made me more knowledgeable, a better communicator, and an ever more effective clinical role model.

For optometric educators, an additional best day occurs many times in clinical settings. In labs, clinics and clerkships, it's been thrilling each time I've seen that aha! look on the face of a student. Finding exactly the condition (or its location) that the student was expecting from a thorough case history, or actually observing the relationship between the power, base curve and lacrimal lens when a contact lens is put on an eye is a powerful learning experience. And we clinical instructors get to see the aha! of recognition that accompanies that experience.

Once students recognize the value of material learned in the classroom, they begin to evolve in their clinical reasoning ability. I have been involved in the Clinical Reasoning track at NECO and, before that, in the Problem-Based Learning courses. Another of my best days would have had to be the day I first heard a student say to him/herself, "What else could it be? How can I confirm this diagnosis? What treatment would work best for this particular patient?" Critical clinical thinking is an important and difficult skill to teach, and this issue of *Optometric Education* is dedicated to helping us in this endeavor. We work hard at it, and the teaching paradigm changes and improves constantly, but what excitement we experience when we observe

our students maturing in their clinical thinking!

Other educators have expressed in this column the sentiment that graduation day is their best day in optometric education. Pride and happiness are certainly part of that day, but for me, a fifth, and probably very best, day comes after graduation. I have had the sheer, unadulterated pleasure of observing some of my former students working as clinicians, administrators and educators themselves. A day when I see an intelligent, successful, happy person enthusiastically using the education I have so enjoyed helping her/him achieve is truly the best day I can imagine. It almost makes me cry.

Dr. Gilman recently retired from her position as an Adjunct Assistant Professor of Optometry at The New England College of Optometry.