



(L-R): Dr. Rebecca Griffiths and Dr. Gwen Werner

GUESS WHO I RAN INTO AT THEOS?

AN AZDA MEMBER IS REUNITED WITH THE DENTIST WHO INSPIRED HER TO JOIN THE PROFESSION

Dr. Gwen Werner expected to learn valuable business insights while attending AzDA's THEOS (To Help Each Other Succeed) Business Mastership Program. However, she had no idea that she would be reunited with a childhood dentist who inspired her to also become a doctor.

Upon hearing about the surprise reunion, AzDA's staff felt Dr. Werner's journey to become a dentist would make an intriguing story. What follows are thoughts from Dr. Werner and two of her mentors: Dr. Rebecca Griffiths, whom she met at THEOS; and Dr. Richard Simonsen, a past associate dean of ASDOH.

? WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST THOUGHT WHEN YOU SAW DR. GRIFFITHS AT THEOS?

DR. WERNER ► I didn't recognize Dr. Griffiths at first, but I thought that she looked familiar. I almost left without talking to her, but I just had to learn if she was or wasn't the dentist who inspired me to look into the dental field.

? DID YOU IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZE DR. WERNER AT THEOS?

DR. GRIFFITHS ► Dr. Werner looked very familiar to me, but I couldn't place her. I am terrible with people's names, but I never forget a face. I kept looking at her trying to figure out how I knew her.

There was a connection, but I didn't know what it was until she asked me if I ever had a practice in Scottsdale and then she told me the rest.

? HOW DID YOU COME TO KNOW DR. REBECCA GRIFFITHS?

DR. WERNER ▶ I was one Dr. Griffiths' patients. She was the first private practice dentist that I ever visited. I am American Indian (Navajo) and grew up on the Navajo Reservation in Tuba City, AZ. During that time in my life, I utilized the Indian Health Services for my medical and dental needs. Public healthcare was all I was familiar with until my appointment with Dr. Griffiths.

I moved to the Phoenix Area to attend ASU, and I had been living in the Valley for several years, when I decided that I had to get my teeth checked. I called Phoenix Indian Medical Center to see what the process was to schedule a dental exam appointment. They told me that the waiting list was two years long and that they only saw emergencies on a daily basis. I was shocked. My husband suggested, because we had dental insurance, that I see a private dentist. It seemed like such a novel idea at the time. "You can just call a dentist and make an appointment? Really?" I asked.

Because I'd never visited a private practice before, I was nervous about going to the appointment. However, Dr. Griffiths provided exceptional customer service from start to finish. She took the time to educate me about every aspect of my mouth, from the taste buds on my tongue to the temporomandibular joint. I learned about the functioning of my mouth, and generalized occlusal wear that was occurring. I thought, "This is the best dentist I've ever visited!"

? WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT DR. WERNER AS A PATIENT?

DR. GRIFFITHS ▶ I remember Gwen as a very polite, articulate, well-groomed, and inquisitive young lady who visited my office as a patient many years ago.

? HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT HELPING TO SHAPE SOMEONE'S CAREER AS A DENTIST?

DR. GRIFFITHS ▶ It is gratifying to know that I was able to assist someone with a life changing decision like that in such a relatively short period of time. It speaks to the passion that I still have for my choice to become a dentist, and my ability to share it.

? HOW DO YOU THINK YOU ENCOURAGED DR. WERNER TO BECOME A DOCTOR?

DR. GRIFFITHS ▶ I didn't do it consciously. I believe that Gwen appreciated the manner in which I treat

all patients: with respect, caring, gentleness, and thoroughness. I have been told by other patients over the years that my willingness to spend the time to explain in detail their dental issues on a level they can understand sets me apart from other dentists, who often use auxiliary staff to perform this task. I have always practiced "old school" dentistry in this regard.



2005—Dr. Werner in dental school

HOW DID DR. GRIFFITHS INSPIRE YOU TO CONSIDER DENTISTRY AS A PROFESSION?

? **DR. WERNER** ▶ For me, growing up and going to the dentist was never painful or scary. Although, before I went to see Dr. Griffiths, the experience of seeing a dentist was an unknown, cold, funny smelling place that I was in-and-out of quite quickly. When I was in a sealant program, I remember we walked to the dental clinic and waited for what seemed like hours to sit in a fancy chair, with strange masked people who shouted orders to, "Lay still," "Keep open," and, "You're only making this take longer!" I also participated in a fluoride rinse program where the dentist came to my school and gave us the worst tasting mouth rinse I ever had. I can still remember the dental staff hovering over us with stop watches--just to make sure we didn't spit before it was time. It was never a place I felt comfortable to be educated or taught. This all changed after visiting Dr. Griffiths' practice. She made dentistry fascinating, inviting, and educational.

? WAS THERE A MOMENT WHEN YOU DECIDED YOU WOULD STUDY TO BECOME A DENTIST?

DR. WERNER ▶ Dr. Griffiths definitely ignited the desire to enter the dental field. I left that appointment full of information about my dental health. I was also at a point in my life when I needed to make

some “life” decisions. I wanted to earn a degree, and do something other than be a stay-at-home mom (which is definitely the hardest job anyone can take on).

At first, I knew nothing about the different roles of the dental profession. I did some research on the Internet to help me plan a career direction. I first considered becoming a hygienist, with the intent of later becoming a dentist. However, I applied for a job as a dental assistant so that I could see first-hand dentistry was the right career path for me. Several doctors, who I worked with in Tuba City, encouraged me to go straight into dental school. Based on my eagerness and inquisitive nature, it would be the best fit for me. The notion scared me, but I rationalized that I should move forward, and I could at least say, “I tried.”

? WHAT WERE YOUR OBSERVATIONS ABOUT DR. WERNER APPLYING TO DENTAL SCHOOL?

DR. SIMONSEN ▶ I met Gwenlynn Werner when she was an applicant to the second incoming class of the dental program at ASDOH. I was the Associate Dean at the time, and in charge of the admissions program. Gwen was the only applicant born and raised on a reservation, the Navajo reservation, in Arizona (Tuba City). So she came with a unique and very interesting background that would not necessarily lead one to expect that she could compete on an equal footing with her fellow applicants. Additionally, she had family responsibilities (a husband and daughter) that would demand her time as well. As I pondered her application with the admissions committee, I wondered, “Would she be able to succeed in such a demanding educational program was on my mind?” In a supple-

mental interview inquiry, Gwen was asked, “How confident are you about succeeding in the program?” Gwen provided both a convincing and courageous answer that proved to be an accurate predictor of her future academic success.

Gwen excelled in the program while she raised a wonderful daughter. She was then offered an attractive postgraduate research opportunity at the University of Colorado, but had to turn it down to fulfill her payback obligation to the Indian Health Service. She successfully paid back her loan obligations by working on the Salt River Indian Reservation for the requisite number of years. In fact, Gwen continues to work on the Reservation giving back to her fellow American Indian population. As a teacher and mentor, nothing gives me more pleasure than to see a student, like Gwen, succeed in such an honorable and exceptional manner. Dr. Werner will be an outstanding member of the Arizona dental community for years to come. She has the ability and desire to foster and mentor other bright young minds to enter our profession, just as Dr. Griffiths had done for her so many years ago.

? HAVE ANY OF YOUR OTHER PATIENTS GONE ON TO BECOME DENTISTS?

DR. GRIFFITHS ▶ I know of a few patients that I treated as children in Pennsylvania who told me they wanted to become dentists. There was a young man in particular here in Arizona, who was not a patient, but his mother was a head pain patient of mine. She received TMJ/orthodontic treatment from me. Apparently, the son was impressed enough with the results achieved in her case that it inspired him to attend dental school.

(Left): Another mentor of Dr. Werner's, Dr. George Blue Spruce, the first American Indian dentist in the United States.

