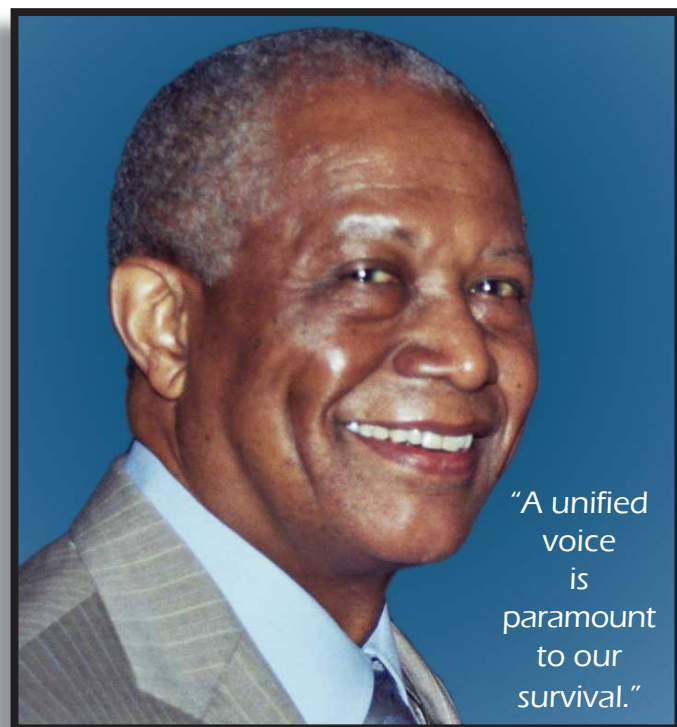


Unified Voice

“We are only caretakers of this profession for those who will follow,” said Dr. Raymond Gist. “I will speak to you eagerly and candidly no matter how pleasant or unpleasant your questions and concerns may be.” Dr. Gist, President-elect of the American Dental Association, made those comments to the AzDA House of Delegates on March 6, 2010. As a follow-up, INSCRIPTIONS invited him to answer a few questions specifically from Arizona members.

While researching Dr. Gist for this article, one word kept popping up: “ambitious.” An alumnus of the University of Michigan School of Dentistry (where during his senior year he was elected class secretary), Dr. Gist served two years in the U.S. Air Force, attaining the rank of Captain. He credits grade school teachers, professors and instructors, classmates, colleagues, and most of all his parents for encouraging his ambition and who, upon learning he wanted to become a dentist, were “excited for me... to enter a noble profession.”



Today, Dr. Gist maintains a private general dentistry practice in Flint, Michigan. He is Past President of the Michigan Dental Association (MDA), a Fellow of the International College of Dentists and American College of Dentists, and Founder and Past President of the Mid-State Dental Study Club.

Dr. Gist and Mrs. Jill Gist have been married for 45 years and have one daughter.

As President of the MDA, what was your greatest learning experience?

There were several. First I had to learn ways to encourage our members to communicate their issues and concerns. Then I learned to prioritize those issues and concerns and translate them into strategic priorities, and then translate those priorities at the board level. This prepared me to apply these principles at the national level.

In an article published in “Dental UM,” you said that you decided to run for the presidency of the MDA because you felt you could make a significant contribution. What was that contribution?

Actually it was to publicize the MDA initiative that had already been set in motion -- to intensify our efforts to expand the access to care program for underserved communities, called Healthy Kids Dental, throughout the entire state. I organized a work group comprising many agencies including the Department of Community Health, Delta Dental Plan, and our association PR agency. We devised strategies for getting our message to the legislative body and general public and it worked well. We were initially able to expand the program into 37 counties, but at this point, it has expanded to 61 out of 83 counties. There is still a lot of work to be done to

“Our best option at this time is to educate our patients.”

continue this initiative in a state with severe challenges to its budget, and a coalition in Michigan is working feverishly to get this done. I want this issue completely resolved, and I will continue to help in any way possible.

As ADA President, what do you hope to learn during your term of office, and what do you hope your significant contribution will be?

I want to focus on unifying our profession. It is healthy to agree to disagree but we must speak in a unified voice to Congress -- that is paramount to our survival. We must seek common ground in order to deliver that unified message. Issues differ from state to state and our mission is to seek as many solutions for our entire membership as possible.

What else can members expect from you during your term?

They can expect someone who is working diligently on their behalf. Dentists should be at the forefront of addressing all issues of our profession, and that is where my energy will be focused. We are losing respect in many areas, especially when it comes to access to care for the underserved. I am not confident that we're effectively communicating just how deeply concerned we are and how vigorously we are working to address these issues. I will work tirelessly to help get that message to our policy makers.

Speaking of getting the message out, how can we best communicate the value of ADA membership to recruit and retain members?

I firmly believe that we will always retain members through our actions. We have a particular obligation to serve and mentor students and new dentists, to set an example with our ethical conduct and effective advocacy. Members understand that we are a dedicated group but we sometimes don't appear to be totally organized. That must change.

When you assume the office of ADA President, what will your top priorities be?

Number one, I plan to work closely with students and new members. My main concern is to address their pressing issues and engage them in active participation. In so doing, we can enhance their chances for success no matter which path they choose in dentistry as we strengthen our collective voice.

Communication is a priority especially as it relates to our governance, our structure, at the ADA. I would like our members to be aware that we have a very nimble, responsible, and responsive Board of Trustees and we are committed to maintaining an atmosphere at the leadership level that is conducive to addressing and meeting their needs. Acting in a dignified manner with diligence means we can conduct our business efficiently and effectively and this must be ongoing. We must demonstrate that to everyone -- new members, seasoned members, elected officials, and the community. Maintaining a strong focus on governance is of great importance to me.

Finally, I believe it is urgent to promote inclusion and by that I mean removing any barriers that may inhibit our ability to enjoy meaningful and productive dialogue with like-minded associations, agencies, and other individuals and groups who share our common goals. I am very much looking forward to participating in the discussions at the ADA Diversity Summit next month.

How does the ADA plan to increase communication and interaction with state and component constituents?

This is an issue being discussed at the board level. We are updating and enhancing our web presence which we hope will make a dramatic difference. Watch for an exciting project that amounts to each member having his or her own web page. I am pleased to announce that we just hired a Director for our new Division of Communications and together we will strategize ways to better deliver our messages electronically, in print, and in some cases in person.

How is organized dentistry responding -- or how SHOULD it be responding -- to encroachment on the profession from dental tourism? This is a big issue in Arizona.

At this time, I feel our best option is to educate our patients. They are vulnerable to promotions and are really not giving thought to the consequences of their actions. We have a responsibility to make our patients aware of the potential outcomes and encourage them to talk

to their insurance carriers. We have to be mindful that we all have freedom of choice, freedom of movement, and the best we can do is point out that they could be creating big problems for themselves. We will find more solutions as we progress but right now creating awareness should be our focus.

How is organized dentistry responding -- or how SHOULD it be responding -- to encroachment on the profession from mid-level practitioners?

That is a very good question. Our leadership has the resources to address the issue of access to care and that is where it should start -- with dentists. If there is ever going to be an additional team member, it should be guided and monitored by the profession of dentistry, just as we should monitor the scope of practice and continued competency of new team members.

Adding new team members, even if they are competent, is not going to solve the problem; we can't drill and fill our way out of it. In some ways, this issue mirrors dental tourism in that it provides opportunities to create greater oral health literacy among our elected leaders and the public.

Our current workforce is not being utilized to its full capacity. We have to educate and engage policy makers in this process to provide adequate funding, remove bureaucracy, and allow third parties to administer Medicaid programs for dentists. We can partner with our policy makers, and help them to help us, once they realize that we have the resources and the knowledge to address the

Right: INSCRIPTIONS Editor Dr. Rob Roda with Dr. Gist at the AzDA House of Delegates last March.



issue of access to care. Once we gain a foothold with our issues of prevention, oral health literacy, fluoridation, emergency treatment, etc. we will have a much clearer picture whether we need additional team members and if so how those teams should be structured.

Why should a non-member dentist join organized dentistry today?

In my opinion, there is a perception right now that we are slow to respond and don't do enough for members. That must be eliminated. Membership offers a direct route to CE, to camaraderie, to that unified voice. We must communicate the message that membership is so beneficial, you can't afford *not* to be a member. Once non-members understand that, not only will they join, they will recruit others.

Organized dentistry must continue to work really hard to recruit and retain new members. One current challenge is getting new members to stay on board after their initial five-year lower dues membership expires, and I believe that directly correlates to the perception that we are not doing enough. Today and into the future, we must focus on our members -- especially new graduates -- and listen very carefully to them.

Tell us about your first, or one of your earliest, experiences volunteering for organized dentistry.

Upon being discharged from the military, I returned home to Michigan and practiced in a children's health center. The director invited me to a component meeting, and after that meeting I joined. About three or four meetings later, I was invited to be on the Legislative Committee and I accepted. I began to really learn what we were all about, learn about the issues, and learn how effective we could be. This stimulated me to become more involved and I eventually chaired that committee. I just couldn't let it go because I saw how valuable it was. I could see the progress. As the issues kept evolving, I was really grateful to be part of the solution. I began to see not only how our practices could improve but just how unlimited the potential was, and still is.

How do you relax?

I exercise a lot. It's very good for stress relief. I also listen to jazz. My headphones go everywhere with me. And, whenever I happen to be passing through, I really enjoy getting reacquainted with my family and friends. We settle down, relax, and have fun together.

I was good at balancing my time until... well, let's just say that my life is a little more off balance than I would like it to be, but that comes with the responsibility of leadership. The emails keep coming, the issues keep popping up. There is so much going on and in order to keep up, it requires a significant amount of time... something I am willing to invest.

Most of the questions for this interview were supplied by the AzDA Council on Communications, Jerry P. Sparks, DDS-Chair. Denise Rucci, Director of Communications for the Arizona Dental Association and Managing Editor of INSCRIPTIONS, conducted the interview. If you have any questions, or would like to suggest future topics or interviews for INSCRIPTIONS, please email Ms. Rucci at Denise@azda.org