



Dr. Walter C. Buchsieb, Sr: A discussion on Teeth, Cars, and Really Important Thoughts for a Life Well-Lived

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One of the highlights of my summer was having the privilege of interviewing Dr. Walter Buchsieb for this article. The GLAO was 3 years old when Walt Buchsieb was born. This makes him the keeper of almost a century of history. As we spoke, I was struck by how different things were “back then”, but when I went home and reviewed my notes I realized that there were a lot of themes that hold true for orthodontists today - the stress of getting into residencies, ups and downs of practice situations, life throwing surprises, the struggle for work-life balance, and other familiar challenges that we experience. So please enjoy my summary and some advice from a 97 year-old with a sharp mind and a lot of life from which to draw.

Sometimes you dodge a bullet...twice

Walt was raised in Bexley, Ohio, on the east side of Columbus. Early in life, he literally “dodged a bullet” by being a member of Bexley’s graduating class of 1947, which put him in the first class of young men that weren’t automatically sent to fight in World War II. However, a military commitment was still mandatory, so Walt did the required training (including gun training), but was able to further his education.

Walt applied to medical school, but quickly learned the old saying that “life is what happens when you’re making other plans”. Competition was stiff from vets returning home from the war as many of them were awarded spots in the class. Influenced by a relative who ran the dental lab at Ohio State, he decided to pivot and apply to dental school. Walt was accepted and graduated from The Ohio State College of Dentistry in 1955. Being in dental school during this time period not only provided him with the education for his livelihood, but also provided deferment from having to fight in the Korean War.

A commitment can become a grand adventure

It was around this time that he got serious with his girlfriend Betty, a nurse at Grant Hospital in Columbus. They decided to get married on June 19th, 1955. They thought they would settle in Ohio, but the Army had other plans, so they found themselves traveling across the country in his '53 Chevy to San Francisco to report to base by July 19th - one month after their wedding! Walt described this trip as “the most wonderful five-day trip you could imagine!”, noting that they had fun stopping at Wall Drug store and seeing Mount Rushmore.

They arrived in San Francisco and found a small apartment that didn't have a good functioning stove. Walt will tell you that it's amazing how many dishes you can make in an electric skillet! He was stationed at Letterman Army Hospital at the Presidio, which had beautiful views of the Golden Gate Bridge. The Army then sent him to Germany for two years, where they were stationed in Zweibrücken, where he served as the Chief Dental Officer for the 539th General Dispensary there. Amazingly, this was the town where his great grandmother had lived and immigrated to the US from at age 10, and along the route where Patton and his troops had marched. Walt and Betty welcomed the birth of their first child, Chuck, while in Germany. He was promoted to 1st lieutenant, and then captain.

His advice for us: “Say yes to the adventure! Life gives you “nos” when you want “yesses” sometimes, but those initial disappointments and surprises often provide the best experiences and memories of your life”.

Being a resident and young orthodontist takes energy...and flexibility

Walt applied to orthodontics residency at Ohio State, and earned a spot in the class in 1958, so they moved back to the US, bringing home both a new baby and a '58 Volkswagen Beetle. The program was co-chaired by Dr. Ben Williams and Dr. Robert Wade. Walt remembers working hard to get through the program, and being busy with having a wife and a toddler. The program went fast, and he was looking for a practice before he knew it. An unfortunate tragedy of an orthodontist in Kettering, Ohio opened up an opportunity for Walt to take over a practice...but he had three months of residency left! Fortunately, his department chairs allowed him to drive back and forth from Kettering to try to stabilize the practice while finishing his residency. He made many trips back and forth along I-70 in his '58 Beetle during what he described as “maybe the most hectic three months of my life!”.

His advice for us: “You will find energy to get through the tough spots in life. Your ability to “rise to the occasion” will surprise you.”

Stepping up to volunteer for community and causes requires balance

While in private practice in Kettering, Ohio for 33 years, Walt managed to find time to raise two kids (he had a second child, a daughter named Christine), and step up to volunteer for all kinds

of organizations in organized dentistry, organized orthodontics, and civic organizations. Serving as part of the newly formed Dayton Dental Society, Walt remembers the fight that they took on to keep fluoridation in the water. “The more things change, the more they stay the same” he quipped, as we discussed the ongoing fluoridation battles going on today. He eventually became president of the local Dayton society, and then rose to be president of the Ohio Dental Association in 1992. It was around this same timeframe that he got involved in the GLAO. He was invited to a GLAO meeting in Detroit by the secretary, and before he knew it, he was nominated to be the secretary! He went through the chairs, and became the GLAO president in the 1990s. This led to a long career in GLAO and AAO involvement, serving as a delegate and eventually having the role of AAO Speaker of the House from 1983-1985. I personally can’t imagine serving as president of the state dental association, and preparing to be AAO Speaker of the House the following year! He was also active in the Centerville Rotary Club, serving as president, and was a Mason. When I asked him how he did all of this, he answered quickly in one word: “Betty”. He credited Betty with keeping things stable at home and with the kids. “Her support allowed me to take on positions and serve, while maintaining a practice and not losing my mind!”

As we discussed the best part of volunteering, he said “the people are the best part- the people that you meet volunteering have something about them internally that makes them different. They live with purpose and an ideal of doing things for the greater good”. When asked about the hard parts of volunteering, he said “it’s the busyness- at a time in life when you maybe have small kids. There is a price to be paid for time away”. He described how Chuck was in the OSU Marching Band, and would love to go back and have more time to enjoy things like that.

His advice for us: “Volunteering is great, but make sure to keep balance so that you can take care of yourself and your family. Support your family first. It can get out of balance pretty quickly when you overcommit. And choose a great partner who helps support you and your family”, citing that “Betty was definitely that partner”.

Having some hobbies outside of teeth is good for the soul

Anyone who knows Walt knows about his love for cars. The ’53 Chevy that took him and Betty to San Francisco to report for duty in the Army, and the ’58 Volkswagen beetle that took him back and forth to sustain his young practice while completing residency, were part of memorable formative chapters of his life, but I probably enjoyed the story of his LaSalle the most. Walt was at an AAO meeting in New Orleans, and became aware of a LaSalle for sale in Tipton, Georgia during the week of the meeting. He was serving as a delegate. On a day off from the House of Delegates, he flew to Georgia and bought the car! The only issue was that he hadn’t really discussed it with Betty, so he had to have it delivered to his office until he could find “just the right moment” to discuss it with her! Well, that moment came quicker than expected when she found the key to it in his pocket while taking some suits from the meeting to the dry cleaner! When I asked about the lesson in all of this, he kind of winked and said “sometimes you have to ease people into a good idea!” This story, along with the story about

his beautiful Auburn convertible that “looked like a Great Gatsby car due to its side mounts”, highlights the need to have life be about more than teeth. I was struck by his passion and joy as he discussed the cars.

His advice for us: Well, aside from the obvious philosophy of “sometimes it’s easier to get forgiven than to get permission”, Walt said “It’s good for your brain to focus on life outside of work, and to find something that you truly enjoy to escape stress and make life more interesting”.

Giving back to the next generation...and appreciating the past generations is important

Walt taught at Ohio State for several years, serving as the clinic director until his retirement in 2004. In talking about his time at OSU, it was evident that he enjoyed that chapter of life immensely. “It was fun to be part of the community at OSU...and to continue learning”. I appreciated his humbleness - that after all that he had accomplished in practicing orthodontics for 33 years, in serving at the highest level of every organization in which he had belonged - that his focus was on being appreciative for what he had learned from the residents and his colleagues at OSU. Maybe it’s this type of humility and curiosity that helps someone live well to 97 years old...and counting.

In addition, Walt had a great appreciation for his ancestors who came to the US and built a life through hard work and determination. “They came from Germany with nothing, and were hard working. They survived major challenges as they built a tannery business from the ground up, including the terrible flood of the 1930s, but they persisted. That is what I am most proud of. I hope that I have added another chapter to that story of hard work and persistence”.

His advice to us: “Keep learning. Be humble and open to learning about someone else’s position on things - you may not be as right as you think”.

In summary, as we reflect on what a great organization the GLAO is as it celebrates its 100th birthday, it is important to remember that great organizations are built by great people, and Walt is just one example of the type of people that have worked hard, loved our profession, and went the extra mile (often in great, classic cars) to serve our organization with passion and dedication. Happy 97th Birthday, Walt. Happy 100th Birthday GLAO!!