

# TRODENT



# FRIENDS OF DENTISTRY CELEBRATES A HALF CENTURY OF SUPPORTING OSTROW

# A CELEBRATION 50 YEARS IN THE MAKING

Ostrow recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of its premier philanthropic support group, the Friends of Dentistry. At a celebration atop the USC Tower in Downtown Los Angeles, the community came together in September 2025 to commemorate the half-century milestone. Joining the Trojan Dental Community in celebration were USC Interim President Beong-Soo Kim, Senior Vice President for Health Affairs Steven Shapiro and Vice President for Health Sciences Advancement James Hughes. You can read more about the Friends of Dentistry's major milestone on page 24.





PHOTO BY CHRISTINA GANDOLFO

Welcome to the Winter 2025-2026 issue of *TroDent*!

I am happy to share with you the next issue of *TroDent*, chock full of just *some* of the exciting developments that have occurred here at the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC during 2025.

It was a challenging year to be sure, requiring a lot of adaptability, resilience and out-of-the-box thinking as we faced challenges on nearly every front. From the fires that devastated the Pacific Palisades, Altadena and surrounding areas — impacting so many in our community — to the changes to federal research funding and international student enrollment policies to USC’s Financial Resiliency plans, requiring restructuring and innovative operational strategies, we dealt with a lot of uncertainty, anxiety and worry throughout the year. That we are able to showcase the continued academic excellence taking place at Ostrow despite these challenges just speaks to the quality of faculty, students, residents and staff who proudly call themselves Trojan Dental Family members.

In a year that called for exceptional resilience and adaptability, we still managed to celebrate many accomplishments. In addition to welcoming a new USC Interim President, Beong-Soo Kim, we also celebrated new dental school leadership, with my appointment to the Dean position taking place in July 2025. I was so thrilled to see at the installation ceremony so many familiar faces who showed up to celebrate the occasion. It was quite humbling, because frankly so many of you made it possible for me to step into this leadership role and hit the ground running. You can read more about it on pages 20-23. We also celebrated some major milestones — Ostrow’s premier philanthropic support group celebrated 50 years of its support of Ostrow — a golden anniversary we celebrated atop the USC Tower in Downtown Los Angeles (read more on pages 24-29). We also celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Dr. Roseann Mulligan Special Patients Clinic. In fact, even as we celebrated the four decades of the clinic’s history, the Special Patients Clinic earned a \$3.4-million Specialty Dental Clinic Grant to upgrade its operation to ensure many more years of providing transformative oral healthcare (read more on page 6). That was hardly the extent of this year’s funding. With the help of alumni and friends, we were able to complete a fundraising campaign to replace the current Instrument Management Services unit with a new one called, “Uncle Maurice” (read more on pages 8 and 14-15), that will allow us to treat even more underserved patients. We also earned a \$2.5-million gift from Henry Schein Inc. to update the Advanced Operative and Adhesive Dentistry Clinic, which will serve as a model for both the digital dentistry workflow as well as what infrastructural investment can do to enhance our educational programs. You can read more about that on page 10. And, just as we went to print, we found out that we had successfully competed for the TMD-Collaborative for Improving Patient-Centered Translational Research (TMD-IMPACT) grant supported by the NIDCR-NIH (more on that to come). Indeed, there is a little something for everyone within these pages, so enjoy the read and, as always, fight on!

Yang Chai DDS, PhD  
Dean  
G. Donald and Marian James Montgomery Professor of Dentistry  
University Professor of Dentistry, Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, and Otolaryngology-Head & Neck Surgery



INSIDE THIS ISSUE

PHOTO BY GLENN MARZANO

COVER STORY

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SWEET FRIENDSHIP | 24-29

Ostrow’s premier support group, the Friends of Dentistry, recently celebrated its 50th anniversary. That’s a half-century of providing financial support for student scholarships, department or program updates, community outreach efforts, facility enhancements and faculty recruitment. With friends like these, there’s nothing that can stop Ostrow’s longstanding legacy of excellence from continuing for years to come.

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Amrita Chakraborty DDS ’19  
*Bright Little Smiles* Author

CONTRIBUTORS



**AMRITA CHARKABORTY**  
DDS '19  
Writer, “Inspired”  
P. 40

**Catch us up on life post-graduation from Ostrow.**  
After leaving Ostrow, I headed to the East Coast for my pediatric dentistry residency. Eventually, I made my way back to the West Coast and settled in Oregon, where my days now swing between treating kids in clinic and exploring pine-lined hiking trails.

**What are you most proud of about your book, *Bright Little Smiles: A Practical Guide to Dental Care for Children with Disabilities*?**

I’m most proud that the book makes disability-informed care feel human and doable. When parents tell me that the book helped them feel more understood in the dental office, or when dental team members say, “I finally know what to do in these situations,” that means everything to me.

**What is a lesson you learned at Ostrow that you’d say you use every day?**

I learned that being a dentist is not only about perfect margins and clean radiographs; it’s about showing up consistently for the people you serve, especially those who are overlooked or underresourced.



**KATHARINE GAMMON**  
Writer, “Growing a Garden of Academic Excellence”  
P. 20-23

**Writing has appeared in:** *Scientific American, National Geographic, Princeton Alumni Weekly, Trojan Family Magazine and Stanford Magazine*

**How did you first get started in the world of scientific writing?**  
I went to grad school for science writing at MIT and graduated in 2007. I have been writing about science ever since.

**What did you learn from writing about Dean Yang Chai for our cover story?**

I always love my conversations with Dr. Chai. He is a wealth of knowledge about life, persistence and collaboration. I was impressed to learn how long he’s been focused on helping kids with cleft palate. The desire to provide better care and answers for those families has guided so much of his scientific career.

**What do you like to do outside of work for fun?**  
I live in Santa Monica, and I love to be at the beach with my two boys. They surf, I splash around and occasionally take long swims if the water is warm enough!



**ANTHONY MARTIN**  
Illustrator, “Diagnosis Certain”  
P. 30-33

**Illustrations have appeared in:** *Vanity Fair, Les Echos, L’Express, Télérama, Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health*, among others

**How did you first get started as a professional illustrator?**  
After studying illustration and graphic design, I started working as a freelance illustrator. I approached the press, publishers and various professionals, which allowed me to build up my network of clients.

**How many years have you been doing it?**  
Since 2021, four years

**What do you find most rewarding about it?**  
What I like most about working as an illustrator is seeing my visuals in magazines that I enjoy but also transmitting messages through my illustrations.

TRODENT

WINTER 2025-2026

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PHOTO BY CHRISTINA GANDOLFO

FEATURES  
GROWING A GARDEN OF  
ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE | 20-23

In 2025, Yang Chai PhD '91, DDS '96 was named Dean of the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC. His impact on the school, though, started decades ago when he began planting seeds as a junior faculty member, moving his way up the ranks and working to bring people and programs together. Today, the fruits of his labor are beginning to blossom as Ostrow positions itself as the home of excellence in oral healthcare education — be it in research, clinical education, patient care or Ostrow’s robust community outreach programs.

SAVED BY  
THE KIT |  
18-19

It could’ve ended a lot worse for Evan Pickles '27, who slammed into the back of a bus while zipping across campus on his bike. In addition to some physical injuries, Pickles fractured his right front tooth. Thanks to a program that provides Department of Public Safety Officers with Save-A-Tooth kits, first-responders were able to think quickly and store the tooth properly for Ostrow students and faculty to save it.

DIAGNOSIS  
CERTAIN |  
30-33

Ostrow dives into the world of artificial intelligence and machine learning, with a new three-app system, developed by Ostrow faculty members and fueled by a proprietary AI algorithm. The Smart Note system helps clinicians streamline their clinical workflow, enhance diagnostic accuracy and improve patient monitoring.

YOUNG, SKILLED &  
CHANGING LIVES |  
35-37

As part of their studies, USC dental students have the opportunity to extend their training beyond Ostrow’s typical patient care settings, with the community clinics selective program. The program, described as “transformative” for so many, places students in real-world community settings where their skills are put to the ultimate test.

# Celebrating 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, Special Patients Clinic Awarded \$3.4 Million for Vital Upgrades



PHOTO BY GLENN MARZANO

### “NO PLACE MORE DESERVING”

Established in 1985, the Dr. Roseann Mulligan Special Patients Clinic has served as both a dental home for patients with special needs — nearly 1,000 patients each year — as well as a place to train future oral healthcare professionals, giving them experience treating this distinct patient population.

As part of their studies, DDS students complete a week-long clinical rotation in the Special Patients Clinic. Some then choose to spend extra time treating these patients. It is estimated that the Special Patients Clinic has served as a training ground for nearly 8,000 dental and dental hygiene students since its founding four decades ago.

“Our students need to feel comfortable treating these special-needs patients, because this could be the only opportunity for these patients to receive dental care,” Suarez Durall said.

The clinic was named the Dr. Roseann Mulligan Special Patients Clinic in 2015, thanks to a generous gift from Mulligan and her spouse, Associate Dean of Distance Learning and Telehealth Glenn Clark. The gift provided the clinic with an endowment, the annual interest of which has continued to fund the operation this past decade.

“I can’t think of a more vulnerable and less-cared for population than adults with special needs,” Clark said of the couple’s decision to fund the clinic. “If you have major health issues or you’re cognitively impaired or have some developmental disability, no one will treat you. So we couldn’t think of any other place in the school that is more deserving.”

*The Specialty Dental Clinic Grant aims to improve access to oral health care for special needs patients across California.*

BY JOHN HOBBS MA ’14

When you are a patient with special health-care needs, finding a lasting dental home can be a challenge.

Whether it’s a lack of training to treat special-needs patients, insufficient physical infrastructure necessary to adequately support such patients or the absence of financial incentives from third-party payers, many dental clinics are not eager to treat this patient population. In fact, it is estimated that nearly 50 percent of special-needs patients have experienced difficulty accessing dental care.

It was the reason the Dr. Roseann Mulligan Special Patients Clinic was established as a dental home for patients with cognitive and developmental delays and physical, psychological or medical disabilities as well as the frail elderly and patients living with HIV/AIDS.

“It was clear to me that not everyone was receiving care,” said Associate Dean of Dental Public Health and Community Outreach Roseann Mulligan MS ’87. “I set about creating a clinic where people with disabilities could get that care and were welcome.”

This year, as it celebrates its 40th anniversary, the Special Patients Clinic is poised to make an even greater impact on this population, thanks to a \$3.4-million Specialty Dental Clinic Grant awarded by the California Health Facilities Financing Authority (CHFFA).

“We are excited and deeply grateful to receive this funding, which will enable us to provide culturally competent, high-quality

care to our most vulnerable patients — those with no other place to turn,” Mulligan said. “For over 40 years, we have been dedicated to this vital service, and we remain committed to continuing this mission.”

The state-funded CHFFA grant was established to help improve oral healthcare access in California for special-needs populations through the development and expansion of specialty dental clinics.

### CLINIC UPGRADES ON THE HORIZON

At Ostrow, the grant will fund the renovation of the Special Patients Clinic’s eight operatories and the addition of three new operatories outfitted to treat bariatric patients as well as patients who use personal mobility systems. The grant will also allow for the addition of a larger restroom for bariatric patients, an electronic health record review room and a patient check-in desk.

“Upon completing the renovation, we will be equipped to accommodate an even greater number of patients, including bariatric and wheelchair-using individuals, thanks to the new spatial accommodations and specialized equipment that were previously unavailable,” said Department Chair of Geriatrics, Special Needs and Behavioral Sciences Piedad Suarez Durall MS ’18. “We anticipate a significant reduction to our waitlist, as the demand for these essential services continues to rise alongside the growing patient population in need of this specialized care.”

Slated to be completed in late 2027, the clinic upgrades will give Ostrow the infrastructure necessary to increase annual patient visits in the Special Patients Clinic by nearly 40 percent.

## Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC

# Thank You!

### Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry Board Members

For decades, Ostrow has been strengthened not only by exceptional faculty and students, but by dedicated volunteer leaders who help move the school forward. Ostrow’s Board of Councilors, Friends of Dentistry Board and Century Club Alumni Association Board each play a unique role in advancing the school’s mission, supporting students, expanding programs and championing the value of oral health. Their service and partnership reflect the very best of the Trojan Dental Family. This year, we proudly recognize these boards and the individuals who give their time, insight and commitment to shaping Ostrow’s future.

#### BOARD OF COUNCILORS (BoC)

The BoC is the Dean’s primary advisory body composed of a group of industry leaders appointed by the USC President. BoC members offer strategic guidance on Ostrow’s vision, its place within the broader USC landscape and long-term priorities in education, research and community care. Having collectively contributed more than \$18 million, they are ambassadors for the school and key partners in major initiatives such as the Campaign for the University of Southern California, pediatric clinic renovation, digital dentistry expansion and community oral health, among others.

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		Mark E. Tarica DDS ’74

CONTINUED ON PAGE 41 >

PHOTO BY PEEKPEEK CORP



The current IMS unit (marked above) has reached the end of its useful life, paving the way for “Uncle Maurice” to take over in 2026.

# Ostrow Completes Fundraising Campaign for Mobile Clinic, IMS Unit

Alumni and friends helped make the dream a reality, raising more than \$1 million for the mobile dental clinic, with priority going to replacing the aging Instrument Management System unit.

BY JAMIE WETHERBE MA '04

Thousands of dental students have been impacted by the USC Mobile Dental Clinic, which has provided essential dental care to underserved communities for nearly 60 years.

So, it seems fitting that it's taken a large number of supporters across the USC community to usher the mobile dental clinic fleet — the nation's largest, outside the U.S. military — into a new era.

After 27 years in operation, the clinic's Instrument Management System (IMS) unit — the mobile fleet's workhorse housing the materials, instruments and equipment required to serve up to 1,000 patients each year — was fast approaching the end of the road.

“Our trailer has reached the limits of its functionality,” Associate Dean of Dental Public Health and Community Outreach Roseann Mulligan MS '87 said. “Without an updated and better-equipped workspace, IMS could have become a bottleneck that hindered our ability to grow, innovate and maintain the high standards of care and education that define our program.”

## HELP FROM FRIENDS

In 2023, Ostrow launched the Power of 1,000 fundraising campaign, an initiative to raise \$1 million for the Mobile Dental Clinic, prioritizing the replacement of the aging IMS unit, by securing \$1,000 donations from

1,000 alumni and friends.

Over the course of the campaign, several supporters made significantly higher donations, including Mulligan and her spouse, Associate Dean of Distance Learning and Telehealth Glenn Clark.

The couple — who pledged \$100,000 — have long been inspired by the clinic's mission of compassionate care and community engagement.

“Both of us served as mobile dental clinic student directors during our respective times in dental school — though we didn't know each other back then. That experience was profoundly meaningful to each of us,” Mulligan said. “We're proud to support a program that shaped our values and continues to make such a real difference in people's lives.”

Organizations dedicated to expanding dental care also made major donations, including United Concordia Dental Insurance, which donated \$50,000 toward the effort.

The Envista Smile Project, a philanthropic foundation helping underserved communities gain access to oral care, donated \$750,000 to Ostrow's Access to Care Initiative. Of those funds, \$250,000 will directly support the new IMS unit to ensure continued oral healthcare treatment for children, families and veterans.

“We saw an opportunity to amplify our shared mission,” Envista Smile Project Manager of Events Rubin Casas said. “Beyond physical improvements, we hope this collaboration inspires future generations of dental professionals to embrace service-oriented care, ensuring that empathy, expertise and innovation continue driving oral health forward.”

## INTRODUCING “UNCLE MAURICE”

Another large donation — a pledge of \$500,000 — came from the Maurice Amado Foundation, a family foundation led, in part, by brothers Mark Tarica '70, DDS '74 and Samuel Tarica DDS '72.

The Taricas have a long history of supporting Ostrow, a legacy that started with their father, also a dentist and alumnus.

“From the time he graduated in 1937 to the time that he died, he felt it was very important to give back to the school,” Sam said. “Mark and I want to do the same.”

The Maurice Amado Foundation was started by, and named after, the Taricas' great uncle and has directed grants to a variety of organizations for more than 60 years.

Mark and Sam had been looking for an opportunity to support the Mobile Dental Clinic. “During my time in dental school, I was part of the first mobile clinics,” Sam said. “I saw the start of what's evolved into today's clinics.”

When Mark learned of the fundraising campaign, an idea started to percolate. “I thought it might be a cool thing to name the trailer after our great uncle — it almost sounded cute,” he explained.

Thanks to the investment from the Maurice Amado Foundation — and many others — the “Uncle Maurice” IMS unit will hit SoCal roadways in 2026. For Mark, the benefits are threefold.

“It certainly helps the community and the university,” he said. “It's fabulous for the dental students — this is an avenue where they can gain serious experience as providers and professionals dedicated to compassionate, equitable care. It's a win-win-win.”

## OSTROW FACULTY LEAD AMERICAN BOARD OF OROFACIAL PAIN

Associate Dean of Distance Learning and Telehealth Glenn Clark assumed the role of the president of the American Board of Orofacial Pain in 2025, helping to set the standards for the practice of orofacial pain treatment across the nation. Additionally, Assistant Professor of Clinical Dentistry Anette Vistoso MS '20 was selected to serve as secretary/treasurer. The organization was initially created to enhance the quality of care and service provided to the public through certification of dentists providing orofacial pain treatment. It also recognizes practitioners with an exceptional understanding of orofacial pain diagnosis and treatment as Diplomates — a designation necessary to hold a leadership position within the organization. Clark will serve two years as president; Vistoso will eventually serve as president-elect before going on to serve as president herself.

## HARNESSING METABOLIC ENZYMES TO FIGHT CANCER

Metabolic enzymes are mostly known for their work in building up or breaking down molecules, but could they also be used to fight off viral infections or cancer? In a recently published study in the journal *Immunity*, Professor Pinghui Feng and his research team discovered that enzyme *CTPS1*, typically involved in metabolism, might also play an important role in regulating the immune system. It does so by blocking the activation of a master regulator of the induction of interferons, which are molecules that help the body fight off viral infections as well as tumors. The ultimate hope is to create small molecules to target the enzyme, aiming to block viral replication and enhance antiviral immune responses. Pinghui Feng is the Chair of Ostrow's Section of Infection and Immunity. His research is focused on the role of innate immune signaling pathways in infection and pathogenesis of several strains of human herpesvirus.

## SAKAE TANAKA PROFESSORSHIP ESTABLISHED IN ORTHO

The Department of Orthodontics recently completed a \$2-million fundraising campaign to create the Dr. Sakae Tanaka Graduate Orthodontic Endowed Clinical Professorship. The new professorship will help provide ongoing support for a clinic director position, which ensures Ostrow will be able to continue attracting the nation's best and brightest orthodontic residents. The Japanese native Sakae Tanaka (or “Dr. T,” as he was affectionately known), completed his advanced orthodontics training at USC in 1955. He then stayed on as a faculty member, eventually becoming clinic director of the orthodontics advanced specialty program, working alongside Harry Dougherty for many years. Though Tanaka died in 2022, the new professorship ensures his legacy remains alive at Ostrow for years to come.

## KING J. RICHTER ESTATE GIFTS OSTROW \$7 MILLION FOR SCHOLARSHIPS

In 2025, the late Beverly Hills philanthropist King J. Richter made a gift of \$7 million to Ostrow to help support student scholarships. The Richter family made its money in the bottling business. King's grandfather established Richter Bottling Works in 1895, which eventually became Fresno's Pepsi Cola Bottling Company. King and his brother ran the company until it was sold in 1975. After moving to SoCal, Richter shifted his focus to philanthropy, supporting causes that aligned with education as well as his religious beliefs. He also recently gifted the USC Norris Cancer Center as well as Fresno Pacific University. Reportedly, Richter had been the patient of one of Ostrow's alumni.

## SEDGHIZADEH EARNS 2025 EVIDENCE-BASED DENTISTRY AWARD FROM ADA

Professor of Clinical Dentistry Parish Sedghizadeh DDS '01 has earned a 2025 Evidence-Based Dentistry Award in the Accomplished Faculty Category. The award is meant to honor individuals who have made significant contributions to implement and advance evidence-based dentistry in research, practice and the classroom. “Dr. Sedghizadeh is very deserving of the ADA Evidence-Based Dentistry Accomplished Faculty Award and has distinguished himself as a leader who has made, and will continue to make, significant contributions to the development and implementation of evidence-based dentistry here at USC,” Dean Yang Chai PhD '91, DDS '96 said. Sedghizadeh has published more than 100 peer-reviewed articles, received intramural and extramural funding for his research and created the first evidence-based educational certificate program in oral pathology and radiology for practicing dentists.

## COULD WE FIGHT HEAD AND NECK CANCERS WITH IMMUNOTHERAPY?

Traditional treatment options for patients with head and neck cancer can often do more harm than good, sometimes impacting patients' ability to speak or eat. While there are alternatives, such as immune checkpoint blockade therapy where drugs are used to activate the body's own lymphocytes (T-cells) to fight cancer, there are still many patients who do not benefit from such interventions due to ‘tired’ or ‘idle’ lymphocytes. Assistant Professor Dechen Lin and his research team might have found a viable solution, which they published recently in the *Journal of Experimental Medicine*. Using immune checkpoint blockade therapy, he isolated a specific gene, which, when coupled with therapeutic drugs, activates the body's own lymphocytes in a more effective way, potentially improving treatment efficacy.

## Ostrow Receives \$2.5 Million for Digital Dentistry Expansion



*The gift, bestowed by Henry Schein Incorporated, could catalyze a full-on digital revolution at Ostrow, outfitting the Advanced Operative and Adhesive Dentistry Clinic with the technology necessary for a fully digital workflow.*

BY JOHN HOBBS MA '14

Ostrow is one step closer to realizing one of its strategic goals of integrating a fully digital workflow into its clinical education program, thanks to a new \$2.5-million gift from Henry Schein Incorporated.

The gift will provide the Advanced Operative and Adhesive Dentistry (AOAD) Clinic — renamed the Henry Schein Cares Advanced Operative Digital Dentistry Clinical Laboratory in honor of this gift — with state-of-the-art equipment, including new operatories as well as the most cutting-edge hardware and software, to elevate patient care at Ostrow.

“We are thrilled to partner with Henry Schein on this endeavor, which is not only critical to our mission of educating tomorrow’s oral healthcare professionals today but also of providing excellent minimally invasive dentistry to our patient population,” said Dean Yang Chai PhD '91, DDS '96.

The sentiment was shared by Henry Schein Inc. Chairman of the Board Stanley M. Bergman.

“We thank USC for sharing our commitment to dental innovation, shaping the future of health and improving outcomes for underserved populations,” Bergman said.

“This state-of-the-art facility represents an investment in the next generation of oral health professionals, one that empowers students with the tools, technology and expertise to provide the highest-quality care in every community.”

### A SAFE SPACE FOR PATIENTS

The clinic, housed on the Norris Dental Science Center’s third floor, boasts a cosmetic-dentistry esthetic, with portraits of pearly-white smiles hanging on the wall in the waiting room and a photo room for “before” and “after” pictures.

Inside the bright, modern-looking clinic, there are five new operatories — provided by Henry Schein — awaiting a diverse population of patients, many from underserved populations, seeking comprehensive oral rehabilitation, often involving full-mouth or segmental rehabilitation. Such patients might have been born with genetic or developmental disorders or experienced substance abuse, severe accidents or other factors affecting their dentition.

The new Henry Schein Cares Clinic offers individuals with these longstanding issues — including patients living with HIV/AIDS — a safe space for treatment, provided by AOAD residents under faculty supervision.

“AOAD provides these patients with highly customized, patient-centered, evidence-based rehabilitative care that respects both their medical complexity and their wish to preserve and restore their natural dentition,” said Associate Dean of Comprehensive Care and AOAD Advanced Program Director Sillas Duarte.

From using intraoral scanners to capture incredibly precise dental imagery to planning treatment using the latest technology to visualize the desired outcome to 3-D printing or ceramic blasting prosthetics, the entire treatment will be completed on premises using a digital workflow.

Duarte has spearheaded the effort to build a clinic that can be an example for future investment.

“By modernizing the AOAD clinic, we are creating a visible, tangible example of what investment in clinical infrastructure can achieve — elevated patient care, a superior training environment and a platform for digital and minimally invasive adhesive dentistry that is second to none,” Duarte said.

### A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

While the gift will initially benefit the Henry Schein Cares Advanced Operative Digital Dentistry Clinical Laboratory, Duarte points out that the clinic often serves as a testing ground for technology that is eventually adopted schoolwide, and the gift’s impact is likely to be felt much more broadly.

“This kind of transformative upgrade often becomes a catalyst. It helps with recruitment of top residents and faculty, supports our mission and vision and gives us a powerful story to share with other potential donors and partners,” he said. “When alumni and friends of the school see how one strategic gift can redefine an entire clinical area, it opens the door for similar investments.”

# FRONT DESK

OSTROW’S GOT TALENT, FIVE THINGS, GAMES AND MORE!

OSTROW’S GOT TALENT

**Luciano Jimenez**  
DDS '26

BEACH VOLLEYBALL  
ATHLETE

*From intramural champion to beach volleyball club president, this fourth-year dental student finds balance on and off the court.*



PHOTO BY CATHY YEICH

“Volleyball taught me not to get discouraged, to keep practicing and improving 1 percent every day — just like in Sim Lab, where techniques feel awkward at first but eventually click.”

—Luciano Jimenez DDS '26



PHOTO COURTESY OF LUCIANO JIMENEZ

BY YASMINE GRIMBLE MCG '16

When Ostrow's "Tooth Fairies" clinched the co-ed intramural volleyball championship at USC in 2025, the victory meant more than bragging rights for Luciano Jimenez DDS '26. For him, it was proof that even in the demanding world of dental school, there's space for teamwork, competition and fun.

"We had a stacked team who all loved the sport," he recalls fondly of his dental school classmates. "It was a blast to be out there together and then come in first place."

That sense of community has been a throughline in Jimenez's life since he first spiked a volleyball at 10 years old.

What began as a schoolyard pastime quickly became a lifelong passion, carrying him from high school and four years of collegiate play at UC Merced to his current role as president of USC's Beach Volleyball Club.

Jimenez's path to volleyball and dentistry winds through several states.

His father, John, an NYU-trained endodontist, ran a practice in North Palm Beach, Fla., while his mother, Maria, encouraged an adventurous family life filled with hikes, beach outings and road trips.

Jimenez spent his earliest years in New York City and Florida before the family settled in Santa Cruz, Calif.

"The first time I saw the redwoods and

the Pacific Ocean, I was blown away," he recalls.

A few years later, at just 10 years old, he completed the Half Dome hike in Yosemite with his parents — an early lesson in perseverance. That active, outdoorsy upbringing instilled in him a love of movement.

"My parents are in their 60s and still do CrossFit," he says. "They taught me that staying active helps you handle stress and live fully."

At his small private school in Santa Cruz, volleyball was woven into the culture.

"Everyone played, it was just the thing to do, and I never stopped."

By high school, he was hooked. That commitment carried into his undergraduate years at UC Merced, where he played for four years on the men's indoor team. He still remembers the thrill of his team's first win over a rival program.

"It was the moment we realized all our hard work was paying off," he says. "The locker room energy was electric, and the gym was packed."

The lessons extended beyond the scoreboard. Early-morning practices and tough losses gave him a sense of discipline and mental toughness. Later, coaching high school teams, he discovered the rewards of mentoring younger players.

"Volleyball has always been one of my

greatest teachers," he says. "It's shown me the value of routine, community and pushing through challenges."

When it came time to choose a dental school, USC was a natural fit — for its academic reputation and volleyball culture.

"I actually looked up whether USC had a beach volleyball club before I applied," Jimenez admits. "Volleyball is grounding for me, and I knew I wanted to keep it in my life."

Since arriving at USC, he's played both indoor and beach volleyball, even competing at nationals during his first year, balancing matches with final exams.

Today, as president of USC's Beach Volleyball Club, Jimenez juggles leadership responsibilities with the rigors of his coursework. For him, the parallels between athletics and dentistry are clear.

"Volleyball taught me not to get discouraged, to keep practicing and improving 1 percent every day — just like in Sim Lab, where techniques feel awkward at first but eventually click," he says.

Looking ahead, he hopes volleyball will remain part of his life long after graduation. Whether through leagues, coaching or simply playing with friends, he finds it essential to his well-being.

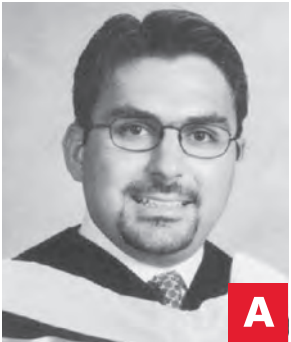
"Dentistry is demanding, but having an outlet like this makes me a better student, community member and future dentist."

# the yearbook game

Match the Ostrow  
notable with  
the headshots  
from their past  
yearbooks.



FRONT DESK



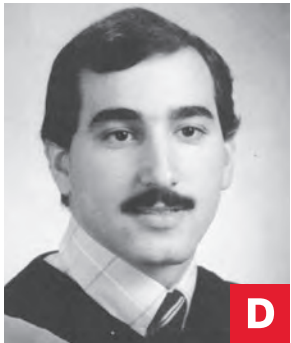
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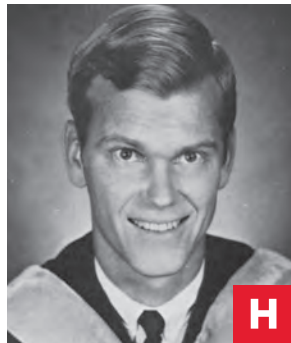
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# FIVE THINGS

## “UNCLE MAURICE”

BY JOHN HOBBS MA '14

It's the heart of the USC Mobile Dental Clinic fleet, and after years of crisscrossing SoCal's freeways, it is ready for retirement. Ostrow recently completed a fundraising campaign to replace its aging Instrument Management System (IMS) unit, the vehicle responsible for storing and sterilizing dental equipment. As the finishing touches are put on the new IMS unit, named “Uncle Maurice” for the family foundation of Ostrow alumni and donors Mark Tarica '70, DDS '74 and Samuel Tarica DDS '72 whose incredibly generous gift — along with many others (read more about it on page 8) — helped us reach our goal, here are five things you need to know about the newest addition to the USC Mobile Dental Clinic fleet.

**1 The new IMS unit, “Uncle Maurice,” is made possible by the generosity of Ostrow’s alumni, friends and supporters, who will get a “shout out” on the vehicle.**  
The initial concept for the fundraising campaign was to inspire 1,000 alumni to donate just \$1,000 a piece to help raise \$1 million to fund the USC Mobile Dental Clinic, with priority going to funding a new IMS unit. Several donors stepped up to help, many of whom wanted to invest even more toward the effort. To honor all who made Uncle Maurice possible, the names of each donor will be printed on the new IMS unit.

**2 Uncle Maurice is 30 percent larger, meaning more space for organization, storage and staff members.**  
While extra room might seem like a creature comfort, it can be incredibly consequential when it comes to the daily operation of the USC Mobile Dental Clinic fleet. The additional space allows for more staff members to work simultaneously, providing a much more efficient workflow across the mobile dental clinic fleet. Improved efficiency enables Ostrow's patient care providers to treat even more underserved patients.

**3 It features updated equipment, including energy efficient autoclave sterilizers, dishwashers and refrigerators.**  
The IMS unit will be outfitted with updated equipment, including energy efficient autoclave sterilizers, dishwashers and refrigerators. The upgrades are more than just techy toys to play with, though. With enhanced instrument control systems, the patient care team can see more patients per day, reduce wait times for patients juggling a number of responsibilities and conduct more complex procedures within the mobile clinic without having to refer the patient to an outside oral healthcare partner.

**4 The new IMS unit comes equipped with solar panels — fitting given how many mobile clinic events occur in sun-soaked areas.**  
Could that constant hum of a generator at mobile dental clinic events become a thing of the past? Uncle Maurice takes a step in that direction, with new solar panels fitted atop the vehicle to capture some of the sunshine that often drenches the Southland for months at a time and turns it into energy, representing financial savings and increased access into more remote communities.

**5 Uncle Maurice will eventually be outfitted with satellite technology, allowing for the sharing of electronic medical records and referrals to local dentists.**  
An upcoming phase of Uncle Maurice's roll-out will be the implementation of satellite communications to allow for the acquisition and transfer of a patient's electronic medical records, giving oral health-care providers the most updated information on the patient's condition and the ability to refer patients to local oral health professionals or back to specialists at Ostrow when further consultations are necessary.

## UNCLE MAURICE

### Instrument Management System

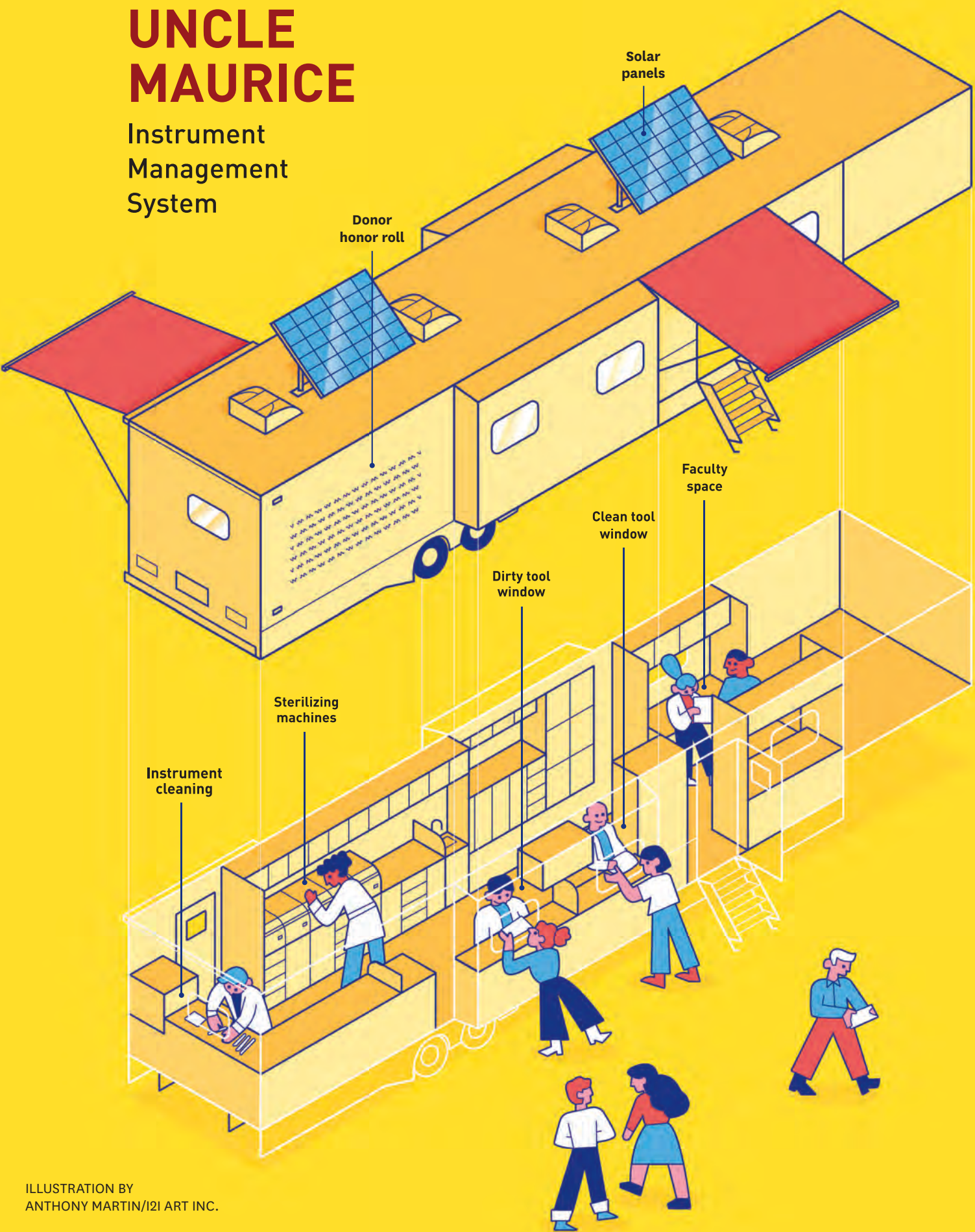


ILLUSTRATION BY  
ANTHONY MARTIN/I2I ART INC.

DAN ORR DDS '75, OMS '79

DENTISTRY MERIT BADGE  
SUBJECT MATTER EXPERT, SCOUTING AMERICA

Dan Orr has been affiliated with Scouting America since he was a young boy, eagerly earning merit badges in public speaking, archery and marksmanship and coin collecting (among others) to rise all the way up through the ranks to Eagle Scout (Fun Fact: Orr earned a scholarship as “Eagle Scout of the Year” in 1968.)

For the uninitiated reader, merit badges represent mastery of skills used throughout a lifetime. Currently, there are more than 135, covering everything from animal science to dentistry to sports. Merit badges are essential to rise through the ranks to Eagle Scout. To earn them, Scouts must demonstrate proficiency in different areas, relying on professionals, who serve as both merit-badge subject matter experts (to update and review learning materials for the Scouts) and merit badge counselors (who guide Scouts through the requirements, test their understanding and sign off on the completed work). While his boyhood days are behind him, Orr, 75, is still incredibly active within Scouting, serving in various positions over the years as he raised his five boys to become Scouts, too. Today, working as the subject matter expert for the dentistry merit badge, the Trojan dental professional is putting the ‘SC in Scouting America. Here’s what Orr had to say about life as a subject matter expert for Scouting America.



ILLUSTRATION BY JAYA NICELY

**What is your own history with Scouting America?**  
I became a Cub Scout at age 8. My mom became our Cub Scout den mother — for five to six Cub Scouts. Along the way, I was motivated after learning that my dad (a 1950 graduate from what is now known as the USC Viterbi School of Engineering) was an Eagle Scout. I finished up my Eagle Scout ranking at age 14 just as I entered high school.

**What is it about Scouts that appeals to you?**  
It looked to be a lot of fun, and it was! I am still involved at 75 because it is more fun than ever. I’ve held a number of Las Vegas area council volunteer leadership positions and enjoy promoting the values of Scouting in the community (i.e. The Scout Law: A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean and reverent) — all valuable traits for kids *and* adults.

**What positions have you held in Scouting America over the years?**  
I’ve held dozens of positions as I’ve raised five boys within Scouting: Cubmaster, Scoutmaster and more, including being a Merit Badge Counselor for multiple merit badges, including dentistry. I was director of anesthesiology and oral & maxillofacial surgery at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas School of Dental Medicine for 12 years, and we hosted a student- and faculty-run dentistry merit badge class there twice a year. The merit badge pamphlets are regularly updated, and several suggestions I’d sent to the national office were published. The next thing I knew I was asked to be the subject matter expert in 2018.

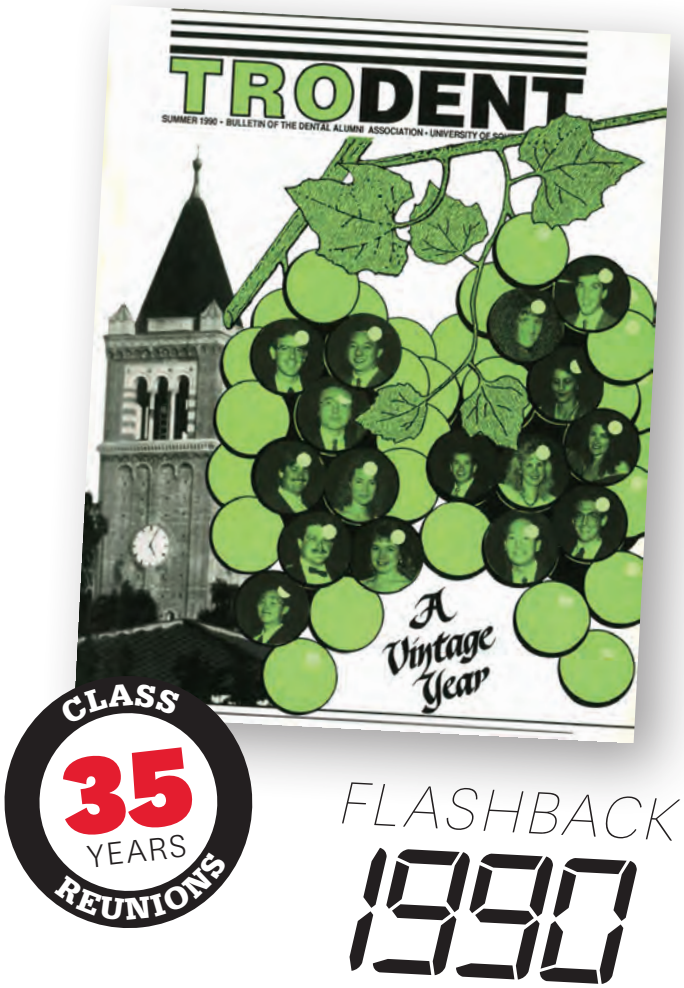


Dentistry Merit Badge

**How did you come across dentistry as a potential profession? What made you choose to pursue that path?**  
I had a wonderful dentist, Dr. Thomas Stratico of Whitter, as a kid. I never looked forward to going to see him, but he made the experience about as smooth as it could be. I always thought that was an exceptional gift, (i.e. to be able to perform a necessary but technically difficult task on an unenthusiastic patient in an optimal manner). He represents one set of the thousands of shoulders I stand upon in my fortunate life. When an Eagle Career Day opportunity presented at USC, it was an easy decision to explore the profession.

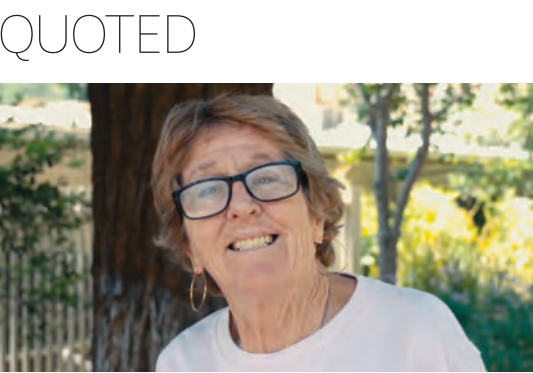
**Through that exploration at Eagle Career Day, you actually decided to pursue an oral healthcare education. Can you tell us about that?**  
I always felt I was very fortunate to know what I wanted to do at an early age, and that was to play baseball! *(laughs)* However, I soon switched to dentistry after the Eagle Scout Career Day at the USC dental school, where 10-15 L.A.-area Eagles met with John Rutherford, dean of admissions at the time. He told us that he was sure if we continued to work hard that any of us could realistically achieve the goal of becoming a USC dentist. So, I knew what my goal was and what it would take to achieve it. Knowing that was a huge advantage in my life.

**Which elective badges did you pursue? Do you partake in any of those activities today?**  
My first merit badge was in public speaking, and I was probably the worst candidate in history. But, nowadays, I routinely speak at large meetings as a dentist, lawyer and editor for state and national professional health journals. I still enjoy the shooting sports because of the archery and marksmanship merit badges. I got into coin and stamp collecting merit badges and loved the reading merit badge. I still try to read about a book a week, alternating serious and fun tomes.



Summer 1990 TroDent

- More than 35 years ago, the *TroDent* celebrated the arrival of the final decade of the 20th century. Some of the top stories included:
- The USC Dental Alumni Association established an endowed scholarship of \$50,000 to award annual scholarships to USC Dentistry students. The group’s hope was that the award “will encourage other support groups of the school, private industry and individuals to sponsor scholarships which can be given to students in an era where the cost of a quality private education has skyrocketed.”
  - Ostrow Hall of Famer Bernard Levin DDS ’64 earned an Excellence in Teaching Award from the Century Club, the precursor to today’s Century Club Alumni Association.
  - George Higue DDS ’40 received the Pierre Fauchard Academy Award. “The recipient is typically one who has gone well beyond any ‘usual’ or ‘expected’ limits in his service to the Academy,” said Ostrow Hall of Famer Rex Ingraham DDS ’41 in the article.
  - The UCLA School of Dentistry celebrated its 25-year anniversary, having been established in 1964 with its first class of 28 students. As part of the celebration, they sealed 25-year-old dental instruments, photographs and other memorabilia into the walls of the newly constructed school, aiming for it to be opened in 2015.



**“I hardly smile, but with this [treatment], I’m able to really smile. That means a lot.”** —Deborah, who received oral health care from USC at the Union Rescue Mission, after losing her husband of 44 years and facing the resulting dire financial circumstances.

Watch: [tinyurl.com/DeborahGetsHerSmileBack](https://tinyurl.com/DeborahGetsHerSmileBack)



**“We tested how these organoids responded to the chemotherapy drug called Cisplatin and found that their sensitivity to the drug matched how the real patients responded, suggesting that these models can help predict treatment outcomes.”** —Assistant Professor Dechen Lin discusses his research using “organoids,” tumors collected from patients and grown in a laboratory to better understand how to treat the cancer without all the typical adverse effects.

Watch: [tinyurl.com/StudyingOrganoids](https://tinyurl.com/StudyingOrganoids)



**“We really get to see firsthand the challenges and what it means to have a lack of access to care. It reminds us that empathy is such a huge important function in our job because, at the end of the day, even though it’s great to have hand skills and the knowledge, it’s really about who we can provide care to.”** —Somkene Okafor-Okwuego ’21, MA ’22, DDS ’26 talks to Spectrum News 1 about the academic benefits of providing treatment to unhoused populations as part of her dental training.

Watch: [tinyurl.com/OstrowonSpectrum1](https://tinyurl.com/OstrowonSpectrum1)



PHOTO COURTESY OF EVAN PICKLES

# SAVED by the KIT

## HOW A TROJAN STUDENT’S BIKING ACCIDENT BECAME A LESSON IN QUICK THINKING AND CAMPUS CARE

BY MICHELLE MCCARTHY

It was a typical February morning for Evan Pickles ’27, as he zipped across campus on his bike, headed to math class. But everything changed in an instant when he encountered a bus.

“I was riding in the bike lane, and there were two buses driving in front of me,” he recalls. “I went around the first one and then the second — and there was a third bus just parked there. I ran straight into the back of it.”

Upon impact, Pickles’ right front tooth broke in half. “Everything slowed down, and I watched as a piece of my tooth flew out of my mouth,” says Pickles, a mechanical engineering major and an athlete on USC’s swim team. “I hit my head pretty hard, my face was banged up, and I broke my knee.”

Fortunately, a bystander quickly came to Pickles’ aid and called 911. USC’s Department of Public Safety (DPS) officers arrived promptly, followed shortly by paramedics. Although the paramedics urged Pickles to go to the hospital, he insisted on addressing his damaged tooth first. After he explained that saving the tooth was his top priority, they recommended he visit Ostrow, conveniently located just a short walk from the accident site on campus.

“Being a lifeguard for the past four years, I have first-aid experience and have dealt with little kids getting their teeth knocked out,” he explains. “I knew the quicker I could get the tooth back in, the better chance it had to survive. I went back into the street and grabbed my tooth, and DPS gave me a Save-A-Tooth kit. I’d never seen one before, but it was perfect.”

### USC’S TOOTH-SAVING PROTOCOL

The kit — a small, sealed container filled with a special vitamin-and-electrolyte solution — was exactly what he needed.

Implemented at USC in 2022 through a collaboration between Ostrow and DPS, the save-a-tooth protocol ensures all officers are prepared for dental trauma. It might seem like a small thing, but it can mean the difference between saving a tooth and losing it permanently.

Pickles decided to make his way to the dental school, but as he attempted to get back on his bike, his injured knee gave out. “I realized there was no way I could make it on my own,” he recalls. With assistance from the paramedics, he arrived at the clinic shortly after noon.

“I was a little bit apprehensive because they said it was students who would be treating me, but they were so professional and walked me through every step. They explained everything: the risks, the process, the long-term care. I was totally impressed.”

According to Feroza Hayatt DDS ’26, the dental student who, under faculty supervision, treated him later that day, “Evan did everything right. He found the tooth fragment quickly and placed it in the solution within minutes. That gave us the best possible chance to restore it.”

### EXPERT CARE AND AN UNEXPECTED SETBACK

To restore his tooth, Hayatt and her team cleaned the broken fragment and the remaining portion in his mouth. They applied dental bonding material and carefully reattached the fragment. “We placed a small barrier behind the gap to prevent the piece from falling backward during placement,” Hayatt says. “Then, we cemented it into place and shaped it to match the surrounding teeth. I polished it up, made it look pretty and gave him a mirror to check it out. He looked at it and smiled, and that made me feel good.”

The entire visit — including emergency paperwork, X-rays and treatment — took

about three hours. Midway through, Pickles became lightheaded during an X-ray and had to sit down. “They responded immediately — brought me a chair, ice packs, a glucose tablet, even food,” he says. “They brought in extra faculty members just to check on me. It was above and beyond.”

But the incident didn’t just affect his smile — it disrupted his athletic season. Pickles had been training for a major swim meet the following week. While his tooth healed within a day, his knee was another story.

“I fractured my kneecap,” he says. “If the break had been any worse, I would’ve needed surgery. As it was, I had to wear an immobilizer for four weeks and completely stop swimming. I’m hoping to compete again this summer.”

### SMILES ALL AROUND

In hindsight, Pickles says the experience completely changed his initial hesitation about being treated by student providers. “I tell all my friends now: If anything ever happens to your teeth, go to the dental school. They’ve got your back.”

As for his tooth? “It looks incredible,” he says, with a smile. “You can’t even tell I chipped it, and even I have trouble finding where it broke. It looks amazing. It’s crazy what they were able to do and how well it turned out. The attention to detail was incredible. Overall, it was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had at a dental office.”



Every DPS officer is now armed with Save-A-Tooth kits to handle dental trauma quickly and safely.



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA GANDOLFO

# Growing a Garden of ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

His path to USC from China led the clinician-scientist through resilience and growth — and now the Ostrow Dean will nurture learning, patient care and research into the future.

BY KATHARINE GAMMON

On Sundays, Ostrow's very busy dean, Yang Chai PhD '91, DDS '96, can be found doing something far from working with stem cells or students. With his hands covered in the dirt of the garden outside his home in Los Angeles, he's thinking about vegetables, flowers and fruit trees. He feels peaceful among the persimmons, pomegranates and the citrus fruits that are just starting to get big this time of year. "I love working outside," Chai says. "I do a lot of yard and gardening work and enjoy building things in the yard."

After more than three decades of pioneering groundbreaking research and hundreds of peer-reviewed publications, Chai was officially appointed Dean of the Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC in July 2025.

And like his garden, he's been planting seeds and cultivating the success of the school for decades, slowly and methodically working to bring people and programs together. In his own telling, it's a labor of love — as well as passion, resilience and collaboration — to see academic success blossom.

## DRAWN TO THE MAGIC OF MEDICINE

Chai was born and raised in Beijing China, in what was then called Peking — he and his family lived in

the residential neighborhood close to the Forbidden City in the center of the metropolis. His was a family of medical professionals and educators — Chai's maternal grandfather received medical training in Chicago in the early 1930s, before returning to China, where he became the first person to perform open-chest surgery in the country.

When Chai was just 5 years old, he went to live with his grandmother, who worked as a nurse. The young boy spent long days on the hospital ward, just playing and observing the adults around him. To a young child, there was something almost magical about watching patients improve with good care. "You can see how patients come in, get treated, and they get better," he recalls.

As he spent years hanging around the hospital, Chai found himself drawn to the human face. "I always felt the human face is our identity," he says. "I really was drawn to the magic of medicine."

When it came time to apply to college, Chai felt his path was clear: He wanted to follow in his family's footsteps in the health professions. He went on to earn his degree from Peking University School of Stomatology. It was there that he specialized in oral and maxillofacial surgery — a result of his fascination with faces. It was a defining moment, he says: He was treating kids with craniofacial birth defects like cleft

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE >



PHOTO BY CHRISTINA GANDOLFO

Growing a Garden of

# ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

lip and cleft palate. Weary parents would always ask him two questions: *Why did my child get this?* and then, *If we have another child, will this happen again?*

Chai didn’t have the answers, and it weighed on him not to be able to fully explain the causes of cleft palate. “Back then, we didn’t know as much as we do today about the cause of these congenital birth defects,” he says. “Those questions really changed me.”

### FOLLOWING HIS HEART

He knew that he had to learn more. So knowing “basically nothing” about Los Angeles, he applied to graduate school at USC — specifically because he knew it had one of the longest-running craniofacial doctoral programs. Shortly before departing from China, Chai married his then-fiancée Lihua Liu, who had received a fellowship from the United Nations to study in USC’s master’s program in applied demography. Later, Liu continued her education at USC and received her PhD degree in demography and medical sociology. Today, she is an associate professor of clinical population and public health sciences and spatial sciences with dual appointments at the Keck School of Medicine of USC and the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

After receiving his PhD degree in 1991, Chai completed his postdoctoral training at the Center for Craniofacial Molecular Biology (CCMB) and received his DDS degree and license to practice dentistry in the United States. Chai started as a tenure-track assistant professor at USC in 1996. He and Liu were planting roots.

Since then, Chai followed his heart and cultivated his research in craniofacial development and has been continuously funded by the National Institutes of Health at CCMB for nearly three decades — even as he took on administrative roles, raised two daughters (also USC alumnae), taught courses and mentored students. “I’m very, very grateful to be able to do this research and get a better understanding about what causes craniofacial birth defects,” Chai says. “Now, with stem cells and tissue regeneration, we’re really getting close to

some therapies that can help patients to get better treatment outcomes.”

Between his wife, two daughters and Chai himself, the family holds eight degrees from USC. That makes the university feel like home in so many ways — professionally, socially, culturally and academically. “USC has been so good to us. As we developed our careers, we have met such inspiring and smart people who are great colleagues,” he says. “I just feel like the university has been a place for me to grow, for me to learn and then a place to give back.”

### MAKING THINGS BETTER FOR OTHERS

One way that Chai has been able to give back is by growing CCMB and the school’s research program. He says that the school has nearly tripled its research funding in the past years, contributing to Ostrow’s latest ranking as the nation’s second highest-funded dental school by the National Institutes of Dental and Craniofacial Research. “Now serving as the Dean of Ostrow, I get to help our school to continue our 128 years of legacy in education, clinical excellence, patient care, research and community outreach” he says.

Ostrow also houses occupational science/occupational therapy and biokinesiology/physical therapy — both top-ranked programs in the country — which has spurred some interesting interdisciplinary collaborations.

Chai points to a pediatric dentist who worked with occupational therapists to modify the treatment environment to provide treatment for kids with developmental disorders as an example of the ways that different tracks work in harmony, making better opportunities for all patients.

To students, he has some advice: “Be passionate about what you do, continue to stay curious, and don’t be afraid to make mistakes,” he says. “Rejections are OK, as long as you can learn from them and keep trying. They are often the moments that teach you the most about yourself — about resilience, humility and the importance of persistence.”

Chai’s garden is full of the fruit he’s nurtured, and likewise, his research and professional career is blooming with opportunities. Through it all, he stays humble — and curious. “We’re all here for a very finite amount of time,” he says, “and we just want to make things better for others.”

## DEAN’S LIST

After a year as Interim Dean — and more than three decades as a Trojan dentistry community member — Yang Chai recently took the reins at Ostrow. As part of that year in the interim status, Chai spent a lot of time talking with the community to get their feedback about the direction of the school. “I truly believe that the most important thing for a leader is you first have to be a good listener,” Chai says. After listening to that community feedback, here are some of Chai’s priorities moving forward:

### EDUCATION

- Continue strengthening our educational programs, focusing on academic excellence.
- Incorporate artificial intelligence, machine learning and digital workflows into educational programs.
- Continue growing our scholarship endowment to ease the financial burden associated with seeking an advanced healthcare degree.

Regularly offer faculty members opportunities for professional development and continuing education.

### PATIENT CARE

- Develop and implement precision health care through collaboration with the medical care system.
- Continue to grow our community outreach efforts to expand collaborations with schools, healthcare systems and organized dentistry.

### RESEARCH

- Recruit even more clinician-scientists focused on translational research.
- Find ways to embark upon cross-school and cross-disciplinary research to develop new collaborative programs that will propel us in new directions in prevention, diagnosis and treatment.

### FUNDRAISING

Develop and strengthen corporate and industry partnerships to be able to translate our discoveries into a new gold standard of patient care.



# *Celebrating* 50 YEARS OF SWEET FRIENDSHIP

*Ostrow's premier philanthropic support group, the Friends of Dentistry, come together to celebrate a half-century of supporting the school — impacts of which can be felt in every corner of the school.*

BY YASMINE GRIMBLE MCG '16

## MEET THE FoD BOARD

The Friends of Dentistry is led by a board, distinctive Friends of Dentistry members who act as ambassadors for Ostrow, helping to position the dental school among the nation's most prestigious. Here is the current roster of Friends of Dentistry board members:

**Brian Hong DDS '89, PEDO '92, MS '96**  
**Chethan Chetty DDS '00**  
**Santos Cortez Jr. DDS '76, PEDO '78**  
**Marina Jimenez DH '90, MHA '09**  
**Reuben L. Johnson DDS '12, ENDO '20**  
**Ruth Kawakami DDS '90, ORTHO '95**  
**Karen J. Liang DH '02, DDS '06**  
**Mindo Lee DDS '03, GPR '04**  
**Ali Modarres DDS '91**  
**Saro Setian DDS '00**  
**Gary S. Solnit DDS '86**  
**Derick Tagawa DDS '68, ORTHO '71**

**L-R:** Gary S. Solnit, Santos Cortez Jr., Karen Liang, Derick Tagawa, Yang Chai, Brian Hong, Marina Jimenez, Saro Setian and Mindo Lee took a group portrait before the FoD's 50th anniversary celebration. **Not pictured:** Chethan Chetty, Reuben L. Johnson, Ruth Kawakami and Ali Modarres

PHOTO BY GLENN MARZANO

On

a clear September evening in 2025, just beyond the glass railing of the USC Tower, the Los Angeles sky glows from the setting sun's golden rays. Thirty stories up, Ostrow alumni, faculty, students and friends lean into conversation as the sun drops to the west. Former classmates mingle after delighted double takes and hugs; Interim USC President Beong-Soo Kim walks around the room, introducing himself and posing with community members for the cameras; and a handful of current students stand just a little straighter as they're introduced to the benefactors who have been helping make an Ostrow education possible for almost twice as long as many of these current students themselves have been alive.

On its surface, the elegant building-top celebration marks the 50th year of Friends of Dentistry, the premier philanthropic support group for Ostrow. But, for those gathered atop the USC Tower that night, the milestone is a chance to look back at five decades of generosity and forward to what the next generation of donors, alumni and students will build together.

"Standing on that rooftop and seeing so many eras of Ostrow together really brings home what Friends of Dentistry has done for the school," says Friends of Dentistry Board Chair Brian Hong DDS '89, PEDO '92, MS '96. "You saw the past, present and future of the profession all in one place."

## IT STARTED WITH AN IDEA

Friends of Dentistry began in 1975, when volunteer leader John B. Wilson DDS '36 and then-Dean William H. Crawford realized that the USC dental school needed a focused group of champions to help keep pace with a changing profession. The school had plenty of loyal alumni — the Century Club had already raised a substantial amount of money to help fund a new dental facility to be built on the University Park Campus, for example — but this new group asked members to lean in even more and walk alongside leadership as partners.

"Back then, dentistry was changing quickly, and you could see the educational cost curve already bending upward," says Derick Tagawa DDS '68, ORTHO '71. "Friends of Dentistry gives the Dean flexibility to do things tuition alone cannot cover like recruiting top faculty and implementing state-of-the-art technology."

Originally called Dentistry Associates, the group later received the name that members say better reflects its

spirit. For Vivian Chui DDS '86, ORTHO '93, who served as Friends of Dentistry Board Chair from 2003 to 2019, that spirit is what keeps the group strong through leadership transitions and economic ups and downs.

"What makes Friends of Dentistry special is that it is very pure at heart," Chui says. "It is about people who love the school, want to help students and genuinely enjoy each other's company in both social and professional settings."

In fact, Friends of Dentistry members all share similar traits — a commitment to academic achievement, clinical excellence and cutting-edge research; a desire to see the profession continue to grow, under the steady leadership of future oral healthcare professions trained at Ostrow; and often a sense of duty to give back to the institution that set them up for success themselves.

To become a Friends of Dentistry member, donors must contribute at least \$25,000 to Ostrow. Memberships come in levels — Chairman Level (starts at \$300,000), Presidential Level (\$150,000), Provost Level (\$50,000) and Dean's Level (\$25,000). You can see the entire list of members here: [tinyurl.com/FoDRoster](https://tinyurl.com/FoDRoster)

## MORE THAN FUNDRAISING

Today, Friends of Dentistry supports Ostrow in ways that touch upon scholarships, faculty, community outreach, technology and special initiatives. Yet, members are quick to say that providing necessary funds to Ostrow is only part of the story.

"Friends of Dentistry is the premier support group of Ostrow, but we are also ambassadors," Hong says. "We listen to the students, other alumni and the Dean and then try to step in where we can make the biggest difference."

For Carol Summerhays DDS '78, a Friends of Dentistry member and former Chair of Ostrow's Board of Councilors (2019-2022), the group offers a way to turn strategy into action.

"Serving on the Board of Councilors gives you a broad view of where the school is headed," Summerhays says. "Friends of Dentistry lets you act on that understanding — whether that is supporting scholarships, community outreach or new clinical spaces."

Beyond formal meetings — Friends of Dentistry holds three to four meetings annually — the group builds community through shared experiences. Members reconnect at the annual Scholarship Recognition Dinner, cheer together at Trojan football games and, on occasion, travel abroad as a group. Those moments, Chui says, are less about perks and more about deepening relationships.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 28

“

COCKTAIL HOUR CHATTER

## Why did you decide to join the Friends of Dentistry?



1 “I originally joined FoD by raising money for a scholarship in memory of my father, Al Solnit, but once I realized how much good FoD does for Ostrow and how important scholarships are to the students, I realized I wanted to remain involved.”

—Gary S. Solnit DDS '86

2 “I had incredible mentors in dental school at USC. Daniel Gordon, Alex Koper, Bernie Levin and Max Sosin gave me unlimited opportunities by sharing their knowledge and expertise. I had no way to pay them back other than paying it forward by financially supporting Ostrow.”

—David Eggleston DDS '70, PROS '72

3 “I joined to support our students and alumni, so they too can experience the strong, lasting bonds that provide guidance, encouragement and a community they can always rely on.”

—Karen J. Liang DH '02, DDS '06

4 “It allowed me to give back to the school that I truly love and to support students the same way others supported me. The invaluable scholarship support it provides helps build a strong relationship between students and alumni, which is what the Trojan Family is all about.”

—Saro Setian DDS '00

5 “I joined to give back to the community who shaped me to become the dental professional that I am today. Most importantly, I wanted to contribute to the advancement of student and alumni development through this wonderful philanthropic organization.”

—Mindo Lee DDS '03, GPR '04

6 “We decided to join the Friends of Dentistry because Ostrow has made such a positive impact on our lives. We wanted to help ensure the programs continue at an excellent level.”

—Scott Adishian '75, DDS '79, PROS '82 & Lee Adishian DH '78



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 26

“When you travel or share a game day with someone, you talk about more than dentistry,” she says. “You talk about family, values and why this school matters.”

## SCHOLARSHIPS IN ACTION

If there is one area where Friends of Dentistry’s impact is felt most immediately, it is in scholarships.

Each year, top third-year DDS students, vying for tens of thousands of dollars in scholarship money, present to a subcommittee of Friends of Dentistry members. Using a rubric to evaluate the candidates, each subcommittee member then individually scores the student’s presentation — judging on academic accomplishments, leadership experiences, outreach activities and more — before tallying up all the scores to determine who merits the largest scholarship offered at Ostrow.

Receiving the call that she had been selected the 2025 Friends of Dentistry Scholarship recipient couldn’t have come at a better time for Andrea Woywitka DDS ’26, whose family was experiencing financial difficulties at the time.

“I remember reading the email in disbelief,” she says. “I had to read it twice before it truly sank in. I was immediately overwhelmed with emotion, brought to tears, and I called my family right away.”

The award has eased the pressure of her final year and allowed her to remain deeply

involved on campus.

“Beyond immense financial relief, the scholarship allowed me to refocus my energy on my studies,” says Woywitka, who will be attending a periodontics residency program at Texas A&M after graduation. “It also provided a powerful sense of affirmation, giving me confidence throughout my journey by reminding me that others believed in me and recognized my commitment to dentistry. It will forever be one of the most memorable moments of my life.”

For 2023 Friends of Dentistry scholarship recipient Francisco Ramirez DH ’18, DDS ’23, the award took on added meaning, coming from successful oral healthcare practitioners who knew what it took to make it in the profession.

“I remember feeling overwhelmed in the best way — a mix of gratitude, disbelief and appreciation,” he says. “To be considered alongside such incredible peers is an honor in itself.”

Receiving the scholarship during his third year eased financial pressure and affirmed his path toward pediatric dentistry.

“It allowed me to fully invest in my education,” says Ramirez, who this past summer completed his pediatric residency at Columbia University College of Dental Medicine. “Knowing that donors believe in my potential pushes me to keep striving so I can better serve my patients and the communities I care about.”

What stayed with him most were the

donors themselves. After the awards, he met several Friends of Dentistry members and later shadowed some in practice.

“They were genuinely invested in supporting the next generation,” he says. “I still keep in touch with some of them, and they continue to encourage me now as I start my career.”

For members like Summerhays, moments like the Scholarship Recognition Dinner capture the heart of Friends of Dentistry.

“Seeing a student relax a little when they realize someone is standing behind them is incredibly moving,” she says. “You realize you are not just supporting a school — you are changing individual lives.”

## THE NEXT 50 YEARS

Ask Friends of Dentistry members why they choose to support Ostrow and their answers almost always circle back to gratitude and community.

“I owe so much of my career to this school,” Tagawa says. “Supporting Friends of Dentistry is my way of making sure those opportunities are there for future students.”

New member Masi Hashemian DDS ’91 brings another perspective. During her time as a USC dental student, she created the Persian Student Dental Association to make sure classmates like her felt connected.

Now, as a retired practice owner and donor, she is drawn to opportunities that help students find that same sense of belonging.

1. Brian Hong chats with USC Interim President Beong-Soo Kim. 2. Yang Chai with the longest-serving FoD Board Chair Vivian Chui. 3. Masi Hashemian is inducted into the Friends of Dentistry. 4. FoD Boardmember Santos Cortez and wife Estela Sanchez along with Ostrow faculty member Rafael Roges and wife Deb Roges. 5. BoC Chair Derick Tagawa and wife Yoko Tagawa. 6. Newly installed FoD member Dimitri Bizoumis and guest Theodora Drake.

See more event photos at [tinyurl.com/FoD50thPics](https://tinyurl.com/FoD50thPics)

“Over time, I developed an even deeper appreciation for my education at USC,” Hashemian says. “If my giving can help students feel less alone and more supported, that is very meaningful to me.”

Chui hopes that future members continue to see Friends of Dentistry as both a serious commitment and a source of joy.

“There is real responsibility in stewarding resources for the school,” she says. “But there is also a lot of fun. The friendships you form and the students you meet enrich your life.”

Hong is already looking ahead to the next chapter.

“We want more alumni and friends to see themselves in Friends of Dentistry,” he says. “There is room for people at different stages of their careers, who care deeply about this place and want to help it stay strong.”

Ostrow Dean and University Professor of Dentistry, Stem Cell Biology and Regenerative Medicine, and Otolaryngology-Head and Neck Surgery Yang Chai PhD ’91, DDS ’96 counts the group as powerful allies in his quest to lead the

# HAIL TO THE CHIEFS

Throughout its 50-year history, as it has made a significant impact on both the school as well as the oral healthcare profession, the Friends of Dentistry philanthropic support group has been led by some truly visionary individuals. Meet the alumni leaders who have held the reins over the years.

## 1975-1978

John B. Wilson

## 1979

Donald L. Tuverson

## 1980

Floyd E. Dewhirst

## 1981

John B. Wilson

## 1982

James A. Holt

## 1983

James W. Perkins

## 1984

Hiroyoshi Shimono

## 1985-1986

Laurence B. Kaplan

## 1986-1987

Lincoln Riley

## 1987-1988

Bruce Schutte

## 1989-1990

John P. Lehman

## 1990-1991

John H. Lytle

## 1992-1997

Edward F. Furstman

## 1997-2001

David Eggleston

## 2001-2003

Mark Tarica

## 2003-2019

Vivian Chui

## 2019-2022

Derick Tagawa

## 2023-2025

Brian Hong

# DIAGNOSIS CERTAIN

*Ostrow faculty members develop three-app system, fueled by a proprietary artificial intelligence algorithm, to assist clinicians with proper orofacial pain diagnoses.*

BY JAMIE WETHERBE MA '04

Providing a patient with the proper diagnosis can be challenging, especially when a condition is solely symptom-based. To zero-in on the correct diagnosis, clinicians must conduct the right combination of assessment questionnaires, exams and tests.

As many as 14 percent of new patient encounters result in misdiagnosis, according to a study that appeared in the *American Journal of Medicine*. This statistic isn't necessarily a reflection of clinician experience, but of the quality of the current diagnostic tools.

As an orofacial pain specialist, Ostrow faculty member Glenn Clark felt frustrated by the way current electronic medical record systems can make it difficult to document, diagnose and provide good patient care.

"I'd spend more time clicking through screens and hunting for the right boxes to check than actually listening to my patients," says Clark, Ostrow's associate dean of distance learning and telehealth. "Meanwhile, I was seeing too many patients who had been misdiagnosed, sometimes for years, often with worsening pain. The problem wasn't that they were being treated by bad healthcare providers — it was that our current systems don't support good diagnostic thinking."

Many providers — from dentistry to neurology to primary care — need to synthesize complex information and consider multiple possibilities.

"We rely so much on the patient's story and history," says Anette Vistoso MS '20, assistant professor of clinical dentistry, director of the Oral Care Precancer and Pain Clinic and director of distance learning and telehealth. "We needed a better way to gather the right information, so we didn't miss

important pieces for each patient's diagnosis."

Vistoso and Clark, along with a research team at Ostrow, developed a new AI-enabled digital assistant for clinicians, with successful outcomes recently featured in the *Journal of the American Dental Association*.

The Smart Note system is designed to seamlessly cover a patient's encounter — from medical history collection to physical examinations and onward — to help clinicians streamline the clinical workflow, enhance diagnostic accuracy and improve patient monitoring.

In a study diagnosing 50 test cases across 10 different clinical diagnoses, this integrated system, which consists of three web applications, was 93 percent accurate, outperforming five other AI algorithms operating on completed clinical records.

It was particularly accurate as a tool to diagnose conditions with distinctive symptom patterns, like trigeminal neuralgia (more than 97 percent accuracy), and burning mouth syndrome (more than 98 percent accuracy).

## "THE AI SUGGESTS, THE DOCTOR DECIDES"

Providers in certain fields, including orofacial pain, often can't rely on biomarkers, like lab tests or image scans, to find definitive answers. Success typically hinges on collecting comprehensive patient histories and performing targeted physical exams.

"I noticed that, even after decades of practice, I would sometimes forget to ask a crucial question that could change the entire diagnostic picture," Clark says. "We strongly believe that if we had a better, more standardized diagnostic navigation system, patients would get more accurate

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ILLUSTRATION BY  
ANTHONY MARTIN/I21 ART INC.

Easy as  
1, 2, 3 ...

The Smart Note System consists of three components to assist healthcare providers with the ability to synthesize complex information and consider multiple possibilities when documenting, diagnosing and delivering excellent patient care.

1. Before Appointment

Before a patient’s first appointment, they fill out both a medical history questionnaire as well as a smart questionnaire. The interface is meant to feel like a conversation, with follow-up questions posed based on a patient’s answers.

2. During Appointment

During the appointment, clinicians enter data into a second app, called the Smart Note System, which synthesizes the information and suggests to the clinician which tests or potential diagnoses to explore.

3. After Appointment

The third component — the MyDocNote app — picks up after the visit, prompting regular follow-up questions to patients so that clinicians can better understand and ultimately predict clinical outcomes.

DIAGNOSIS CERTAIN

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

diagnoses faster. Instead of bouncing between doctors for months or years, they get the right answer the first time.”

Accurate diagnosis through documentation is critical. But with increasing clinical demands and more than 100 different conditions to differentiate, even experienced orofacial specialists can miss critical details.

“We thought, ‘What if we could have an AI assistant that helps ensure we never overlook the important questions?’” Clark shares.

Using data provided by patients and clinicians, Smart Note uses a patented algorithm to point to the most useful next steps, allowing the provider to automatically navigate to the appropriate place in clinical records for documentation.

After the clinician confirms a diagnosis, the resulting record allows it to be added automatically to the AI database, so the system can increase in scope and accuracy as more clinicians and patients use it.

“Our system grows from real clinical experience,” Vistoso says. “Each suggestion comes from analyzed data based on a real patient population, representing a range of demographics.”

This level of curation is key to AI’s

accuracy and keeps it from generating random diagnoses — also known as “hallucinating.”

“We also keep the human doctor in complete control,” Clark adds. “The AI suggests; the doctor decides.”

The Smart Note system evolved from Vistoso’s thesis project, which she started alongside Clark in 2016.

“I was trying to develop this new note-taking system to improve our clinical templates,” Vistoso explains. “We recognized the fundamental need to ask the right questions to identify the correct disease, and the need to know the variables and information for each condition. That’s how we started developing our own system.”

THE HUMAN CONNECTION’S ESSENTIAL

A patient’s encounter with this three-prong system starts with a comprehensive health form ahead of their appointment. Augmented by AI, the smart questionnaire is designed to feel more like a conversation, asking follow-up questions based on the patient’s answers.

“Often, patients come with a referral, and they don’t know exactly what for,”

Vistoso says. “This gives them an avenue to tell us about their symptoms, their pain and chief complaints — instead of relying on the referring clinician, whose concerns might not match the patient’s.”

With a more complete picture, providers can ask targeted questions and perform a more thorough exam.

During the appointment, clinicians enter information into the second app — the Smart Note system, which immediately suggests to the clinician which tests or potential diagnoses to explore.

“The feedback from patients has been really positive. It gives them a voice in their care and helps ensure patient concerns are heard and addressed promptly by the clinician.”

—Anette Vistoso MS ’20, Assistant Professor of Clinical Dentistry Director, Oral Care Precancer and Pain Clinic Director, Distance Learning and Telehealth

“For instance, if a patient’s symptoms suggest trigeminal neuralgia, it might prompt me to test for trigger zones I might otherwise forget to check,” Clark says.

The third and final phase focuses on the follow-up time period, typically an undocumented time between appointments. The MyDocNote app aims to fill the gap between clinical visits by prompting patients with regular reminders to answer questions about their treatment.

This provides clinicians with real-time insights into treatment efficacy, potential side effects and the need for follow-up visits. The patient-reported data funnels into Smart Note, creating a comprehensive view

of the patient’s condition and treatment response over time from their point of view.

“The feedback from patients has been really positive; they feel they have a role in their own treatment,” Vistoso says. “It gives them a voice in their care and helps ensure patient concerns are heard and addressed promptly by the clinician.”

Specialists currently testing the technology have similar sentiments.

“They’re able to spend more time with patients and feel more confident in their

diagnoses,” Vistoso explains. “It makes it very easy for them to communicate with clinicians from different specialties and the referring doctor.”

As for future use, Clark and Vistoso plan to add voice capabilities so doctors can simply speak their observations. They also aim to expand into other medical specialties that rely heavily on clinical reasoning for diagnosis — for instance, headache disorders.

While systems like Smart Note can be powerful tools in treatment planning and patient monitoring, Vistoso and Clark agree that AI could never replace doctors.

“It could never perform the physical examination or diagnostic tests,” Vistoso says. “Beyond that, a machine can’t read the patient, or empathize with their pain or feelings — that’s something only a human can do.”

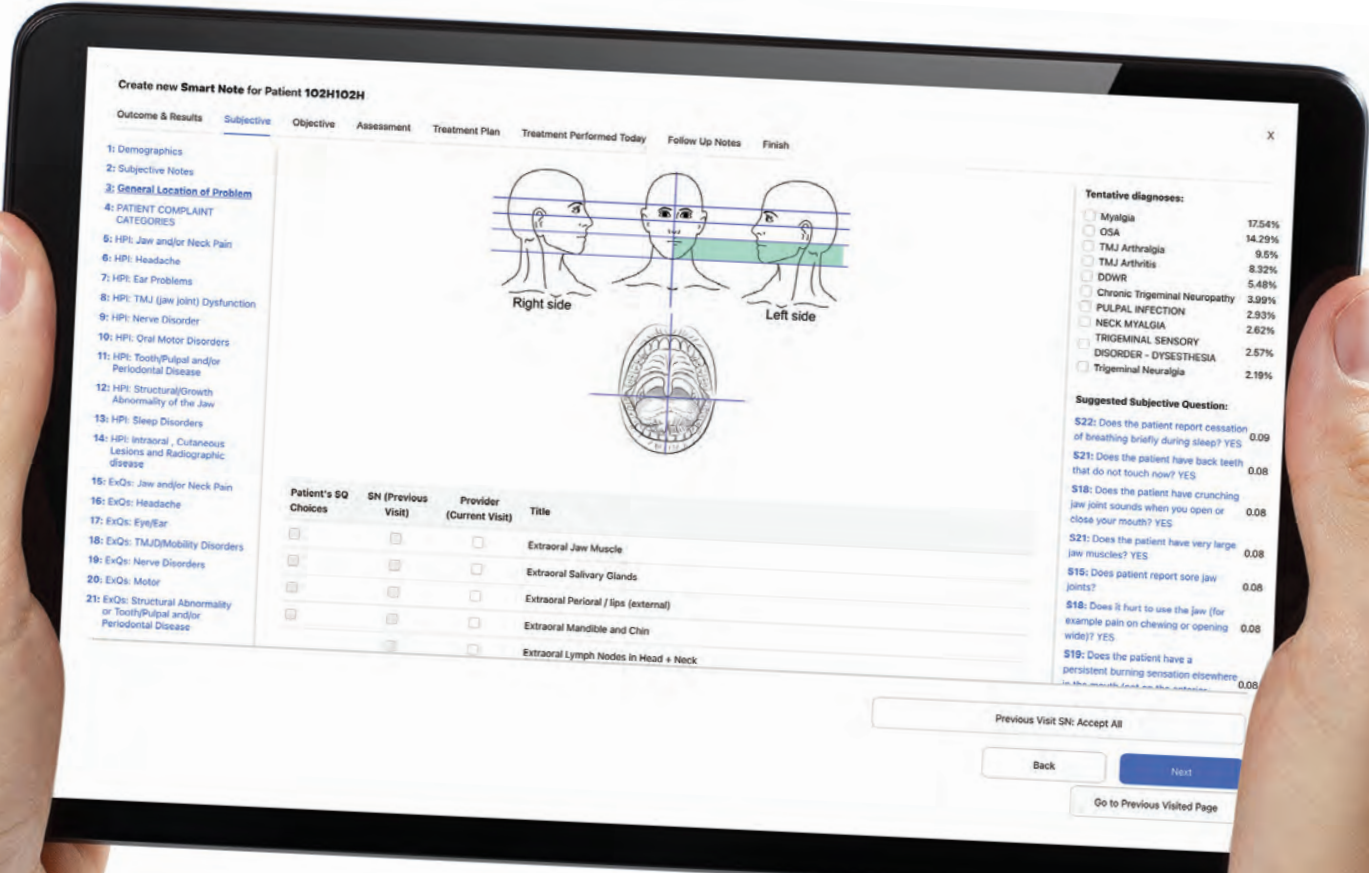
Adds Clark, “AI will never replace the human connection that’s essential to healing.”



Byte-Sized Oral Health Education

Patient care is not the only area in which artificial intelligence is assisting Ostrow’s operation. In an attempt to better facilitate learning for younger generations, a series of podcasts have been created (consisting of full episodes, which are a deep dive into complex topics that can take up to 30 minutes, and briefs, quick two-minute summaries) using artificial intelligence and course materials. The idea is to meet Gen Z learners where they are. As products of the 21st century, this generation, born between 1997 and 2012, tends to expect flexible, on-demand, mobile-first content — so why shouldn’t their course materials be the same? To create these podcasts, instructors simply upload course materials into AI technology, which then creates conversational, engaging and easily accessible audio content that, once reviewed by an expert, can be edited into episodes and stored internally in one place for easy access. The first episode covered Caries Management by Risk Assessment. You can listen to some clips here:

- [tinyurl.com/caries-management](https://tinyurl.com/caries-management)
- [tinyurl.com/treatment-planning-principles](https://tinyurl.com/treatment-planning-principles)
- [tinyurl.com/specific-scenarios](https://tinyurl.com/specific-scenarios)





## 1950s

**Jack D. Preston DDS '57**, a distinguished prosthodontist, educator and leader in the field of dentistry, died peacefully at his home in Templeton, Calif., in July 2025.

Preston was born in 1933 in Lovell, Wyoming to James W. and Viva Preston.

After completing his DDS degree at USC, Preston enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving his country with honor for 12 years, retiring with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

Preston completed a residency in fixed prosthodontics and worked at the L.A. Veterans Administration Dental Service, where he established an advanced prosthodontics residency program. At USC, Preston held the positions of professor and chairman of the Department of Oral Maxillofacial Imaging. He was also honored as the Don and Sybil Harrington Foundation Professor of Esthetic Dentistry and retired as professor emeritus.

Preston was an internationally recognized lecturer, author and educator, sharing his expertise and knowledge across 39 states and at least 22 countries on five continents, influencing generations of dental professionals worldwide.

Following his retirement, Preston embraced life on California's beautiful central coast. He found joy in viticulture and the craft of winemaking, producing award-winning Bordeaux wines. He cherished the star-lit skies of his adopted home, the friendships he cultivated and the peaceful rhythm of his vineyard life.

His legacy continues through his contributions to the dental field, the countless professionals he mentored and the love he shared with his family and friends. To read more about Preston's life, visit [tinyurl.com/FightOnForeverDrPreston](https://tinyurl.com/FightOnForeverDrPreston).

## 1960s

**Walter Weckwerth DDS '68** died at the age of 81 in 2025 at his home in Visalia, Calif., surrounded by his loving family. He was a beloved dentist in Visalia from 1968 until 2010 and served as a faculty member for the original mobile clinic early in his dental career, making trips to Mexico with dental students. He is survived by his wife Rosa and children Tina, Karl, Jon and Nathan.

## 1980s

**Mark Urata '85, DDS '89, OMS '93, MD '96** was named the Clinician of the Year in 2024 by the American Academy of Pediatric Plastic Surgeons. In addition, Urata was a co-author of "Sociodemographic Factors Associated with Delayed Presentation in Craniosynostosis Surgery at a Tertiary Children's Hospital," which earned the PRS Global Open Paper of the Year Award in the Best Craniofacial/Pediatric Paper category.

## 1990s



**Curtis Couch DDS '94** went on the "adventure of a lifetime," traveling to Cambodia in 2024 to provide free dental care to underserved children as part of a Global Dental Relief project. In all, the group of oral healthcare professionals provided treatment and oral health education to nearly 800 children. He's scheduled to go on another Global Dental Relief trip in early 2026. When he's not traveling the world, Couch operates a dental practice in Thousand Oaks, Calif.

## 2000s

**S. Gopal Sirivolu DDS '00** was recently interviewed by the *Wellness Hour*, where he discussed the ways in which his high-tech practice provides implants to patients missing teeth during just one session. Sirivolu is the president and CEO of Universal Smiles Dentistry, which has seven locations across Central Florida. You can watch the interview at [tinyurl.com/DrSirivolu](https://tinyurl.com/DrSirivolu).



**Josemaria Malfaz ENDO '06** and **Rafael Roges ENDO '06** recently summited Mt. Teide, an active volcano and the highest point in the Canary Islands. The two Ostrow grads were accompanied by eight others, including Malfaz's sister, Maria Coral Malfaz (also a dentist) and Roges' wife, Deb.



**Want to share your news with the community?**  
Visit [dentistry.usc.edu/trodent-class-notes](https://dentistry.usc.edu/trodent-class-notes).

# Young, Skilled and Changing Lives

**Ostrow's Community Clinics Selective Program places students in real-world community settings to test their skills, confidence and commitment to serving others.**

BY MICHELLE MCCARTHY

PHOTO BY GLENN MARZANO

The man in the chair raised an eyebrow, visibly unsure. “You look so young,” he said, peering at Adriana Paez DDS ’25 as she introduced herself. The hesitation in his voice was one Paez had heard before during her Community Clinics Selective Program rotation at AltaMed General.

She smiled, masking the nerves with a calm professionalism she’d been building throughout dental school.

“Yes, sir, I’m a dental student from USC,” she replied, “but I’m here to take good care of you — and I’m supervised by our attending doctors.” Slowly, the man nodded, reassured by her poise.

Reflecting on situations like this, Paez, 27, says, “I get that a lot. At community clinics selectives, patients don’t always know we’re students, unlike at USC. It’s up to us to carry ourselves with confidence and quickly build trust.”

This moment encapsulates the essence of Ostrow’s Community Clinics Selective Program experience — placing students in real-world community settings where their skills are tested, their confidence is built, and their commitment to serving others is affirmed.

The program, offered during students’ final year — fourth for DDS, second for ASPID — is extracurricular and highly competitive. Students selected for the opportunity don’t just check off procedural requirements for graduation. They immerse themselves in high-volume clinics that serve diverse and underserved communities, often for the first time outside the controlled pace of a dental school.

Paez and classmate Nellie Manoukian DDS ’25 are two of those students. Both completed multiple rotations at community clinics selective sites, including AltaMed and the Free Clinic of Simi Valley. Each came in search of practical experience. What they left with was far more.

“It solidified my passion for working with underserved communities,” Paez shares. “The hands-on experience and mentorship I received helped me discover what kind of dentistry I want to practice.”

Manoukian echoes that sentiment. “I always throw myself into what I’m passionate about,” she says. “These selectives were the most impactful part of dental school for me.”

## FAST-PACED, IMMERSIVE LEARNING

Community clinics selectives strip away the school clinic’s cushion of four-hour appointments and slow-paced treatment. At AltaMed, students like Paez and Manoukian

can treat up to eight patients per day, learning to manage time, communicate effectively and perform procedures efficiently — all while delivering compassionate care.

“You’re seeing so many more cases in a day, and that’s where the learning happens,” says Adjunct Assistant Professor of Clinical Dentistry Thomas Poelman, a volunteer faculty member at AltaMed General. “The jump from two patients a day in school to real-world clinic demands can be daunting. Community clinics selectives give students a taste of what’s coming, and they leave much more confident.”

Poelman recalls his own community clinics selective during dental school as the turning point in his clinical education. “It was the first time I thought, ‘OK, I can do this.’”

One of the biggest takeaways for students is learning to work with dental assistants in true four-handed dentistry. “That was something we rarely got in school,” Manoukian says. “You learn how to be efficient with another person helping you. It’s a different rhythm, and it’s essential.”

Adjunct Assistant Professor of Clinical Dentistry Lenny Mayorga DDS ’18 emphasizes that these selectives also sharpen students’ communication skills — and not just with pediatric patients. “Unlike rotations at USC, where parents often aren’t present, here they are. Students learn to explain treatment plans, answer questions and build trust with both the child and the caregiver,” says Mayorga, a pediatric dentist and volunteer faculty at AltaMed Pediatrics.

Dental school is rigorous, and balancing these selectives with academic demands is no small feat. Both Manoukian and Paez emphasize the importance of time management.

“I did my pediatric selective during my senior year when I had fewer patient requirements,” Manoukian explains. “I balanced studying for my law and ethics exam on the side.”

Paez took on her second selective while preparing for her licensing exam. “It was definitely a lot,” she says, “but I mapped out my weeks carefully. It was more work but worth every second.”

## FROM SKEPTICISM TO GRATITUDE

While students encounter wary patients — simply because of how young they look — often, that surprise gives way to trust and, sometimes, even admiration.

At AltaMed, Mayorga remembers a 9-year-old patient who was getting antsy during treatment. A dental student, observing at the time, began speaking to the patient in

Spanish. The unexpected connection helped calm the child, and the student stayed to soothe him until the procedure was complete.

“The dad was amazed,” Mayorga says. “He shook the student’s hand and thanked him for making his son feel safe.”

These selectives also expose students to new tools, materials and resource limitations. “We’re spoiled at school with everything we could need,” Manoukian says. “Out in the clinics, you learn to improvise and adapt, and you realize that sometimes less is more.”

Students see a range of pathologies and meet patients with complex needs. These interactions often cement a student’s sense of purpose.

“Seeing how grateful the patients were, especially when they learned I was from USC, was humbling,” Paez says. “They saw that someone cared enough to be there for them.”

Faculty members overseeing these rotations emphasize that these selectives are not only beneficial for students — they’re meaningful for the organizations as well.

“Our patients benefit, absolutely,” Poelman says. “These students help us see more patients, offer same-day treatment and function almost like an additional provider.”

At the same time, they’re preparing students to step into careers with confidence. “These selectives are like a bridge,” Mayorga says. “They show students what real-world dentistry looks like, and sometimes, they inspire them to return and serve in community settings long after graduation.”

## A LASTING IMPACT

Students who are open-minded, proactive and eager to learn make the best candidates. “If you’re motivated and want to build speed and confidence before graduation, this is the best way to do it,” Poelman advises.

“Don’t be afraid to step outside your comfort zone,” Manoukian adds. “You’ll learn more than you thought possible.”

For students like Paez and Manoukian, the Community Clinics Selective Program was more than an elective, it was transformative.

“I’m now heading into an advanced education in general dentistry residency with another federally qualified health center in San Diego,” Paez says. “That decision was shaped entirely by my selective experience.”

Manoukian puts it simply, “Every dental student should do this.”

Their message to current and prospective students is clear: The community clinics selective opportunity may be extracurricular, but its impact is anything but.

**“It really tests your ability to manage your time efficiently and handle multiple patients in a fast-paced environment. You learn how to adapt quickly, think on your feet and manage patients in a professional and personable way.”**

—Natalie Eng DDS ’26 (pictured here) shares why she chose to apply for a community clinics selective at La Maestra Dental Clinic.



MEMORIALS

NOVEMBER 2024 – NOVEMBER 2025

The following were gifts made in memory of individuals who have made a lasting impact on the USC dental community.

In Memory of Dr. Norman C. Bitter

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Yuet Chang Chui

Dr. Ed and Ginny Lew

In Memory of Dr. Donald Curnutte

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Marye L. Deo

Charlotte E. Keenan

In Memory of Clifton O. Dummett DDS, MPH

Dr. Stephen S.C. Chung

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Dr. Armando M. Favela

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Dr. Thomas R. Feder

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Ida Ganapolsky & Yury

Jewish Community Foundation of Orange County

In Memory of Virginia S. and Frank Godoy

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Charles Meyer Goldstein

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

Dr. Michael T.C. Ma

Dr. Oscar E. Valenzuela

In Memory of John Groper

Dr. Lori C. Good

In Memory of Dr. Albert R. Grosnick

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Memory of Guy C. Ho DDS

Dr. Stephen S.C. Chung

In Memory of Dr. Steven Guy Ho

Traci Loretta Huahn

In Memory of Dr. Sanford Neil Katz

Jonathan L. Rosenbloom

In Memory of Dr. Michael Korman

San Francisco Dental Society

In Memory of Joanne Louise Mayne

Heidi M. Mayne

In Memory of Dr. Gerald W. McClellan

Sara Marvin Abraham

Kathleen Mary Burke

Gary Ray Carlson

Win R. Fuller Jr.

Eleanor Palk

Whitecross Foundation

In Memory of Henrietta Romero

Page McCoy

Susan Smith

In Honor of the James and Sara Skahen Family

Dr. James C. Skahen

In Memory of Harold Slavkin

Dr. Stephen S.C. Chung

In Memory of Dr. Leon Frank Unterman

Dr. Patti Mizrahi

In Memory of Beatrice Wong

Rebekah Chow

Shiu Shing Soo

Bing Wang

In Memory of Yoshio Yamaguchi DDS

Dr. Stephen S.C. Chung

In Memory of Dr. Robert M. Ziehm

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

TRIBUTES

NOVEMBER 2024 – NOVEMBER 2025

The following were gifts made in honor of individuals who have made a lasting impact on the USC dental community.

In Honor of Dr. Jeffrey M. Banks

Paulette Sather Banks

In Honor of Sandra Bolivar, J.D.

Dr. M. Marlene Godoy

In Honor of Dr. Yang Chai, DDS, PhD

Dr. Bozidar L. Kuljic

In Honor of Dr. Richard L. Kahn

Dr. Gary R. Harmatz

In Honor of Anna Pattison, R.D.H, MS

Dr. Stephen S.C. Chung

In Honor of Dianne Wiley

Patricia M. Okada

ASPID graduate Amrita Chakraborty DDS '19 discusses the inspiration that led her to a career treating children with special needs as well as being a published author of *Bright Little Smiles*.

When I sat down to write *Bright Little Smiles*, I thought I was writing a practical guide for parents and providers. Instead, I found myself writing my way back through a lifetime of memories.

I kept seeing my little sister in the dental chair. She has Down syndrome, and, as a teenager, I watched her appointments with a knot in my stomach. The room was always too bright, too fast, too loud. People spoke around her instead of to her. Explanations were rushed or skipped because “she wouldn’t understand anyway.” I understood, though. I understood the way her hands tightened on the armrest, the way my dad tried to translate both language and emotion at the same time.

Somewhere in those moments, the seed of dentistry was planted — not from a love of enamel or occlusion, but from a quiet conviction: This has to feel different for kids like her. I wanted to be the person who slowed down, who found the words (or pictures or gestures) that bridged the gap, who made the chair feel safe.

Ostrow gave that conviction a home.

As part of the core team of the USC Mobile Dental Clinic, I met children whose stories echoed my sister’s in different ways — kids who were afraid, kids who had never seen a dentist, kids with disabilities whose needs had been overlooked because everything took “too long.” In schoolyards and community centers, with our clinic on wheels, I learned that

dentistry could be a form of advocacy. We weren’t just fixing teeth; we were telling children, “You matter enough for us to come to you.”

What made Ostrow special was not just the patients we saw, but the way the school saw us. Every student, no matter where we came from, was given space to learn, to make mistakes and to discover our strengths without judgment. As an international student, it is not common to dream of residency, but mentors like Dr. Santosh, Dr. Beale, Dr. Nineli, Dr. Mehdi, Dr. Frydman and many others met me with guidance, not limits.

Ostrow became a haven where I slowly learned to believe that my background, my sister’s story, my love for children with disabilities — these were not obstacles but my greatest assets.

Today, as a pediatric dentist and the author of *Bright Little Smiles*, I carry all of that with me into every appointment. I think of my sister when I dim the light, when I wait an extra minute for eye contact, when I turn brushing instructions into a game. I think of the children I met at the mobile clinic who taught me that trust is earned slowly, one gentle visit at a time.

My hope is that future international students reading this will see themselves in these lines and know: As an Ostrow graduate, the sky is truly the limit. Somewhere out there is a child whose world will be softer, kinder, because you chose to show up for them. That thought is what gets me out of bed every morning — and it still inspires me every single day.

PHOTO COURTESY OF AMRITA CHAKRABORTY

# Herman Ostrow School of Dentistry of USC

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# Thank You!

## Friends of Dentistry (FoD) Board

The FoD Board is the premier philanthropic support group at Ostrow. Since 1975, members have helped raise millions to support endowed positions, academic programs, departmental priorities and more than \$2.4 million in annual scholarship funding. They partner with the Dean and the Office of Development to ensure exceptional donor experiences and strengthen alumni involvement through events such as the scholarship recognition dinner, USC Associates picnics and donor celebrations.

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## Century Club Alumni Association (CCAA) Board

The CCAA Board focuses on alumni success from graduation onward. Members engage new graduates, support scholarships, promote mentorship and career development and assist with marketing and social media outreach to keep alumni connected. Their work upholds a long tradition of alumni involvement and helps create opportunities for future dental leaders.

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### EVENT DETAILS

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Herman Ostrow  
School of Dentistry of USC  
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All participants will receive breakfast, lunch and networking opportunities with current dental students, access to the Business Symposium vendor fair and a printed binder of resources curated specifically for this audience.

### RSVP

Register at [eventcreate.com/e/seller-event](https://eventcreate.com/e/seller-event) or scan QR code



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