Editorial

Saying “good-bye” and “thank you” to a legendary figure in orthodontics

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I can close my eyes and still see him standing in front of me but, most of all, I can hear him speaking. So clearly that I would swear he is here.

I got news of the passing of Dr. Charles Burstone in an email on February 11, 2015. To me, he will always be Dr. Burstone. He was my teacher and mentor. I could talk about him to others as “Charlie” and I could address him as “Charlie” in an email but, in my mind and to his face, he was always “Dr. Burstone”. He did not demand that respect but he commanded it. It was what he deserved.

The news caught me totally off-guard. Of course, it was possible. Dr. Burstone was 86 years old, almost 87. But it just never occurred to me that it could happen… ever. He was always there and he would always be there. I watched him get older but he never seemed to fade in any way. I saw him at every AAO meeting, at Angle meetings, at University of Connecticut (UConn) alumni events, and I corresponded with him occasionally for various reasons. My last communication with him had been only 2 weeks earlier when he had agreed to be a speaker at the AAO annual session for 2016!

I often heard what he was doing and where he was going. He was everywhere. Whenever I saw him, there was always a crowd gathered around. He was legendary.

I was a dental student at UConn when I first met Dr. Burstone. He had given lectures to our dental class that no one understood. He was the department chair and I made an appointment with him to discuss my interest in pursuing specialization. He asked me what it was that interested me about orthodontics. I didn’t know what the “right answer” should be but, surprisingly at that time, I wasn’t nervous. I said that orthodontics offered the opportunity to apply physical principles to biological systems and that I thought that was particularly exciting. Could you have come up with a more perfect answer?

Staying on at UConn to obtain my certificate in orthodontics and Master’s degree, I was able to spend many more hours with Dr. Burstone: in seminar, treatment planning, analyzing treatment outcomes, and in clinic. He posed challenging questions and, over time, I became increasingly doubtful that I would be able to produce the “right answer.” Dr. Burstone would give you a certain grimace when the answer was wrong and you would know that it was time to straighten up. The more I learned, the less confident I became that I knew the right answer. There was always more to know.

As his students, one thing that we, the Class of ’89, knew for sure, was that Dr. Burstone knew everything and that he was always right. It didn’t matter what the topic was, whether it was orthodontics, or European history, or current events. Even when we were sure he was wrong, he was always proven right. Sometimes it would be weeks later that we would find out. After a while, there was no point in arguing. We knew he was right.

Dr. Burstone is certainly one of the people most responsible for my decision to pursue academics as a career. I joined the orthodontic postgraduate program with every intention to enter private practice upon graduation. He convinced me, and maybe even forced me into academics. He persuaded me to give it a try. I remember when he took me aside and comforted me, confiding that it was indeed possible to be successful in orthodontic academics without obtaining a PhD. Obviously, I was not the only one. UConn’s orthodontic program produced more orthodontic academicians than I am able to count. Credit that to a vision and well-thought-out planning. Credit that to Dr. Burstone himself.

I am claiming Dr. Burstone as my own but, of course, there are many others who can do the same. To me, he personified UConn’s orthodontic program. But, he was a native of St. Louis, and certainly Indiana University justifiably claims him as well. Indeed, most of the world can legitimately claim him as theirs. His passion was orthodontics and he loved to travel, he loved to lecture, and he loved to spend time with students all over the world. He was on sabbatical in Germany when we completed the orthodontic program in 1989, and Bhavna Shroff and I traveled there to visit him after graduation. When we arrived, his first words were enthusiastic expressions of the positive experiences he was having with the students there. Indeed, he was overseas lecturing when he passed away in February.

It is tragic that Dr. Burstone is gone but I think he would have planned for it to happen the way that it did. He was active to the end and he died doing what he loved the most: sharing his knowledge with those who shared his passion.