

a conversation with

BRUCE CUNNINGHAM, D.M.D.

Born in Wausau, Wisconsin, and raised in Butler, Alabama, Bruce Cunningham has lived in many different places and traveled all over the world, but he's remained devoted to the state of Alabama—and to the School of Dentistry. For nearly three decades he has practiced dentistry in Jacksonville, Alabama—where he is a member of UAB's Practice-Based Research Network—and he just finished up a term as president of the SOD Alumni Association.

Cunningham talked with UAB Dentistry about his career, his affection for small-town living, and the high hopes he has for the Alumni Association as it rides a wave of unprecedented growth and success at the School of Dentistry.

UAB DENTISTRY: How did you get interested in dentistry?

CUNNINGHAM: My neighbor was Roy Cowan, a well-known general dentist in Alabama. Butler's really small—there's only 2,000 people in the town, and it's a very rural area—so he was very well known and respected throughout the community.

UAB DENTISTRY: Which professors made the biggest impression on you at UAB?

CUNNINGHAM: Everybody has something they remember about David Greer, who died last year, and I could probably list a lot of things I remember about him—but one thing in particular I can remember him saying to me was, "Someday you're going to be a big supporter of this school." And I don't know why he said that to me when I graduated; most of us were of the opinion that we would never set foot in dental school again if we didn't have to.

From there I went into the Army Dental Corps for four years, the first year of which was a general-practice residency, and then an overseas assignment . . . I was in Tehran, Iran, until the revolution back in 1979.

UAB DENTISTRY: At that time in that country's history, you were lucky to have made it out at all.

CUNNINGHAM: Yes, and it was a difficult time for my family, because that assignment was an accompanied tour for me—I took my family over there, and in fact my youngest daughter was born there. When we went over there, it seemingly was a very stable political situation, but then a year after I arrived, things started deteriorating very rapidly, and within 18 months the Shah was history and the country was being run by the Revolutionary Guard under [Ayatollah] Khomeini. It was an exciting time, but also an unsettling time for my family personally.

I'd had a scholarship that put me through dental school, and to pay that back, my obligation was four years; at that point, I still had one more year of obligation, and I did that up at Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville. And then I came to Jacksonville, and I've been here ever since—and I tell people I own a cemetery plot here, so I'm intending to stay.

UAB DENTISTRY: What are some of the things

that you find most rewarding about your practice?

CUNNINGHAM: I think what's probably been the most rewarding thing about my practice is the relationships that I have with my patients—the fact that I consider them not only my patients but also my friends, and it's sort of like a large family. I've got my immediate family, my extended family, my family of staff, and then my family of dental patients, which is just another larger circle of family.

UAB DENTISTRY: Jacksonville's not as small as Butler, but it's small enough that you still get to feel like part of the community.

CUNNINGHAM: And that is why I chose to go to a small town—you can either be a small fish in a big pond or a big fish in a small pond. I know that sounds a little bit egotistical, but I just wanted to be involved in the community. I am always looking for greater opportunities for service, and that's easy to find in a small town.

UAB DENTISTRY: That's one of the areas the School of Dentistry has really been focusing on over the past few years—there are a lot of places in this state that just don't have access to regular dental care, and the school has done a lot to address that.

CUNNINGHAM: You're right—access is a problem in many areas. Obviously you don't think of access problems in a place like Jefferson County; our access issues center mainly around the difficulty that many adults have with being able to afford dental care, so it's an economic access thing. In Calhoun County, we have a lot of dentists, but we also have a lot of people, particularly adults, who are economically disadvantaged and consequently don't have access. In fact, this morning I've been working on that issue—we're working to open a free dental clinic here in Calhoun County to address that problem.

UAB DENTISTRY: Obviously the SOD means a lot to you, considering that you've spent a term as president of the Alumni Association. What in particular made you decide to take that step?

CUNNINGHAM: A lot of people have heard me say this before—I am not God's gift to dentistry; dentistry is God's gift to me. So I feel very privileged to be a dentist, and I feel privileged that I was

allowed to get my dental education at our dental school. In all my years of being a dentist, I've never felt like I wasn't properly prepared compared to my colleagues who went to different dental schools and came from different parts of the country. I never had to take a backseat to anybody in terms of my preparation or education, and I'm thankful for that.

UAB DENTISTRY: What accomplishments are you most proud of from your term as president?

CUNNINGHAM: Although I take no credit for it, I think that we've seen some significant staff development. We've got Scott Huffman, who's our executive director, we've got some wonderful staff members underneath him such as Charlene Phillips, and we just recently hired Kimberly Crowe [in the Alumni Affairs office]. I think she's going to be a real asset to our organization, and we've positioned ourselves with some great staff to better serve the needs of the Alumni Association. We're getting into the computer age; we're in the process of getting all of our data computerized and using the Internet more to increase communication with our members. This past February was the first meeting that people have been able to register for online—which, for the young people out there, probably seems like nothing, but for people like myself who are “technologically challenged,” that's a big move.

UAB DENTISTRY: That's been another big focus of the school lately—introducing new technology and structuring the clinics more along the lines of a private practice.

CUNNINGHAM: And that's definitely going to benefit the students as they transition from the school to their careers—particularly if they are going into the private-practice model, which is what the majority of them are going to do.



Bruce Cunningham

UAB DENTISTRY: What inspired you to become part of the Practice-Based Research Network?

CUNNINGHAM: I guess the problem for those of us who are in private practice, particularly if we're in solo practice, is that we tend to feel isolated because we're so engrossed in patient care that we don't have as much contact and involvement with the larger dental professional community. The Practice-Based Research Network connects me with a network of practicing dentists, and it also brings into my office a facet of dental research, clinical research, that helps me to be a better dentist.

UAB DENTISTRY: One of the things I hear very often from SOD alumni is that they feel lucky to be part of an alumni network that is so close-knit and well connected in so many ways. What are your thoughts on that from the perspective of someone who's spent the last year overseeing that group?

CUNNINGHAM: From my perspective, the true leader of the Alumni Association is the dean of the dental school, although the Alumni Association has a president and officers. That person sitting up there in the dean's office and his or her attitude and philosophy have a major impact on what is going on in the alumni association. And when Dean Thomas came to our school, he immediately recognized that as a dental community we are a pretty close-knit family in Alabama. He not only recognized that but he also appreciates it, and he has been active in promoting closer “family ties,” if you will, among all of the different shareholders in our community. So I give him the credit for the continuing closeness and that sense of community that we have within the profession here in Alabama. It was here before Dean Thomas came here, but he's encouraged it, and that's helped us a great deal. 🍷

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