

Fertile soil

How Donna Ruley grew into the hygienist she is today. by Thais Carter

"I really wanted to go to college, and dental hygiene was a way for me to go. The fact that I'm still doing this 35 years later is pretty amazing," Donna Ruley, RDH, says with a smile. Years ago, she wanted to be a teacher, but in the 1970s that wasn't a "graduate and go" kind of option. Her father wanted her to go to college and be able to start working right away, so a neighbor suggested dental hygiene. "Now I get to teach people every day," she says. "The majority of each appointment is spent on patient education."

STILL SCALING

If Ms. Ruley had to point to one factor that

MENTORING

Partner up

Don't just choose an employer, find a dentist who appreciates your profession.

Don't sit still

Surround yourself with people who push you to be better.

"At the end of the day, I feel good about myself and the work that I've done."

Of all her lessons learned, the one that resonates most with Ms. Ruley is to keep learning. "I tell myself and would tell other hygienists, 'Stay with continuing education!'" she says. "I know I don't practice anything like I did when I graduated in 1974."

PHOTO: CALLIE LIPKIN

has directly influenced her longevity in the profession—beyond the flexible hours and decent salary—it would be her camaraderie with her employer, Dr. Charles Vittitow. "He's a lot of the reason why I'm still in dentistry," she explains. "Working for him has helped me grow professionally and be the best I can be. He has high expectations and doesn't spare any expense in helping me and others to achieve them." Described as both driven and dedicated to quality care, what Ms. Ruley appreciates most about Dr. Vittitow is that he appreciates the dental hygiene profession. "I feel like my opinion matters and he never ques-

tions my treatment choices," Ms. Ruley continues. "When I talk to students in dental hygiene school, I tell them it's important to find someone who respects them and respects the profession. With Charlie, he's given me responsibility, shown me respect, and at the end of the day, I feel good about myself and the work that I've done."

Dr. Vittitow isn't all praise and no action—he quite literally put his money where his mouth is when Ms. Ruley came to him and suggested the office look into purchasing a digital radiography system. While hygienist purchasing influence is obvious (and expected) when related to products

such as prophylaxis paste, scalers, or fluoride varnish, big-ticket items such as digital radiography are often—perhaps too often—a decision left to the dentist alone. "I'd always pushed for computers in the operator, so I knew the benefits of going digital. At the time, I was in charge of the old radiograph equipment—which was dying—so I told him we either needed to buy a new one or make the jump to digital. He told me I was in charge," she remembers. "I got to be the one who picked out the system. I called our local reps for different companies and brought them in, tested their products, and put a sensor in my own mouth. In the end, we went with DEXIS."

FINDING COMMUNITY

Another influence shaping Ms. Ruley's career is her involvement with the Kentucky Dental Hygienists' Association (KDHA) and the American Dental Hygienists' Association. When she first moved back to Louisville, she didn't know any other dental hygienists. She would go to continuing education events and sit by herself. Then, at one KDHA meeting, someone mentioned that they needed a secretary—Ms. Ruley raised her hand and has been an officer at component and state levels for more than 15 years. Today, she is the KDHA president-elect and was responsible for planning the 2007 annual session. "This has been such a place of growth for me," she says. "I've learned so much about myself as a professional and as a person. I never knew I loved event planning until I organized the annual session!"

RESOLUTIONS

Dr. Vittitow and KDHA are the two prongs that have helped Ms. Ruley set goals for 2008: To get a laser in the office, to increase membership in the association by mentoring students, and to work to get another hygienist on the state Board of Dentistry. "These two things have helped me to become the hygienist I am today," she says, "and in turn, I want to help my practice and my association grow as well. I want to take them to the next level." [mh](#)



Perio to parties

Donna has many loves, including Procter & Gamble's Oral-B Ultra Floss for her patients—"It really removes plaque and doesn't take as many strokes!"—and the Design for Vision loupes for herself. Outside the operator, she is a hostess and event planner extraordinaire. With inspiration from *Southern Living* magazine, she experiments with various recipes and participates in mini table setting competitions with her friends.

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