

## THE AMERICAN OPTOMETRIC STUDENT ASSOCIATION IN THE EARLY 1980s

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The founding and early years of the American Optometric Student Association (AOSA) are documented in this issue of *Hindsight* by Ray Myers and Ron Ferrucci. This author became involved in AOSA in February, 1981 as a trustee-elect from Indiana University and was elected its seventeenth president in January, 1984 at the AOSA Congress held at that time in Anaheim, California. This author's following years of involvement in organized optometry resulted in his election to serve as president of the Wisconsin Optometric Association, as the youngest Trustee of the American Optometric Association (AOA) in 1994 and eventually the youngest elected AOA President in its history in 2001, which still holds today.

By 1984, AOSA had evolved into a well-developed organization representing well over 80% of the nation's optometry students in seventeen schools and colleges of optometry in the United States, Canada and Puerto Rico. By that time, the AOSA President was responsible for the AOSA Board meetings, the Annual AOSA Congress meeting and for appointing liaisons to many of the national collegial associations. Appointed by the AOSA President in 1984 were liaisons to the American Academy of Optometry (AAO), American College of Physicians (ACOP), American Public Health Association (APHA), American Optometric Association Political Action Committee (AOA/PAC), the College of Optometrists in Vision Development (COVD), the National Board of Examiners in Optometry (NBEO), the International Association of Board of

Examiners in Optometry (IAB), and the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO). In addition, the AOSA President personally addressed the House of Delegates at the American Optometric Association's Annual Congress meeting on behalf of AOSA, held in 1984 in Hawaii.<sup>1</sup>

The early 1980's saw a change from the more radical years of student activism in the 1970's. By 1984, the economy of the United States was improving, and with the anticipation of Los Angeles hosting the 1984 Olympics – the first time the Olympics had been held in the US in more than 50 years – there was a new sense of patriotism. The now famous 1984 Apple commercial aired during the Super Bowl, introduced the new Macintosh, the first mass-produced Apple personal computer.

The addition of a permanent AOSA Executive Director in 1981, housed in the American Optometric Association's main headquarters in St Louis, helped legitimize and mainstream AOSA in a number of organizations in optometry. Carol Freihaut went on to serve the American Optometric Student Association as its executive director for over twenty-five years and is largely responsible continuing and growing the presence of AOSA. She maintained a continuing bridge of knowledge for the revolving student leaders who had at most two or three years to learn the ropes while representing students across many optometric organizations. It is impossible to give her enough credit for the ultimate success of AOSA which continues today.

My involvement in AOSA began as a trustee-elect from Indiana University School of Optometry, mentored by



AOSA President (IU, 1984) & AOA President (2002) David W. Nelson was the first AOSA president to become an AOA president (Photo courtesy of AOSA).

the newly elected AOSA President, Jim Rowe. Jim was elected AOSA President in 1982 by the AOSA Trustees and he turned to his trustee-elect, Dick (Richard) Brown, to continue as the Indiana Trustee. Professor Ed Bennett at Indiana University was a significant factor in my admission to the school. He is as much a mentor and friend to me today as he was then. He comments to his current students now at the University of Missouri St. Louis School of Optometry that they should set goals and objectives for their career. He uses the example of a former student at Indiana University he knew well who identified during his first year of optometry school his interest in serving as AOSA President and later as AOA President. That person he refers to was me. I had forgotten I discussed my goals with him until years later when Dr. Bennett reminded me of our discussions while jogging.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Bennett headed an informal group of students called "Running Optometrists" who ran two to five miles, twice each week, and it was there that I shared my goals and objectives for my involvement in AOSA and AOA.

As trustee-elect, I assumed the trustee responsibilities from Dick Brown when he became president of AOSA the following year. In running for the presidency in 1984, my concern was that having had two presidents from Indiana in a row, the trustees might decide to rotate the position regardless of the candidates' credentials. The trustees at the time however, decided that a hat-trick of three in a row Indiana trustees becoming AOSA President would be just fine.

The position of AOSA President by this time was formalized and garnered respect from many organizations in optometry. The AOSA President

would be invited to serve in the "AOA structure" of committees appointed by the AOA President and as such, was invited to the AOA Planning meeting, Annual Congress and Fall Planning meetings held around the country. At the Annual AOA Congress held at the fiscal year end for AOA, the AOSA President would address the House of Delegates in a speech. The AOSA President also served as a student member of the National Board of Examiners in Optometry Board and the Association of State Examining Boards. In addition to the AOSA Trustee meetings held twice each year representing the schools, the AOSA President presided over the annual AOSA Congress held in January each year, hosted by a school selected by the AOSA Trustees in the previous year. The competition for a school hosting the AOSA Congress was typically very heated between two schools wanting to showcase their campus. There was a development of state examining boards requiring approval of state continuing education through a review for fee credentialing process called Council on Optometric Practitioner Education (COPE). This certified that a course given for continuing education in a state meeting met educational and ethical standards, a system which continues to this day.

When I took over as AOSA President, the national issues of the time for AOA were eyeglass prescription release rules being issued by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). In rules called "Eyeglasses I and II", the FTC mandated prescription release by optometrists following eye examinations that included a refraction. Knowing that the mandated prescription release would affect the business practice of optometry greatly and also because of the continued exclusion of optometric

services in Medicare, many states were starting to increase scope of practice to allow diagnostic and therapeutic pharmaceutical agents. Optometric academic institutions had already changed greatly to provide the academic background necessary for these initiatives, yet there was still concern and confusion regarding the direction of the profession of optometry. There were many practicing optometrists around the country in each state who felt optometric services should be mainly visual/refractive and not involve the treatment and management of ocular disease. "Detect and refer" was the mainstay of optometric thought for the future for many long-practicing optometrists in the field. This change was apparent to me as the new AOSA President entering a national stage in 1984 – I sensed division in the AOA Board of Trustees at that time, as well as change of direction for the National Board responsible for developing entry level testing for the profession. In addition, there were changes in the state boards to become more open to entering graduates, a standardization of tests for state licensure, and a willingness to accept a national test in place of local state entry examinations. As AOSA President, many organizations would ask for the support, however symbolic, of student opinions and concerns, typically asking for a statement of endorsement. On one of these issues, there was a small confrontation between the students represented by me at AOSA and the National Board over the increasing costs of a three-part board test during the last years of optometric study. The National Board wanted me to endorse the new test they had developed and as AOSA President, promote it in advertisements, encouraging students to support the new testing program. I declined after

great pressure from Norm Wallis, the National Board executive at the time in 1985, to endorse the new test as AOSA President. The NBEO moved forward with the new concept practical exams regardless.

Gaining a sense of the national optometric landscape was eye-opening for me as a young student and new President of AOSA. AOSA had their own programs for members; from membership continuation, budgetary concerns, the development and reporting of various AOSA Board activities, the annual AOSA Congress and liaisons to the aforementioned affiliate organizations. AOSA activities for the year are best documented in the quarterly publication, *Foresight*. The April *Foresight* publication in 1984 highlighted the activities of that year for AOSA.<sup>3</sup> According to my President's Column, the goals and objectives for the 1984-1985 year were to: 1) computerize the main office in St Louis, 2) improve the communication ability of each local trustee with the main office 'possibly' by electronic mail, 3) provide practice management and finance benefits to third or fourth year students, and 4) help the AOA/AOSA computerized placement service in serving providers and seekers of optometric practice. The publication also included articles from liaisons to the various organizations such as a Volunteer Optometric Services to Humanity (VOSH) trip to the Philippines by Illinois College of Optometry students, an article about the APHA convention and the relatively newly-created Vision Care Section, an AOA-PAC article, an article announcing the establishment of a Memorial Scholarship in the name of Dr. John Levene, who had passed suddenly the previous winter, an article covering a research paper given in Vienna, Austria by a Northeastern Oklahoma State University

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optometry student, Dan Bintz, and an engagement announcement of two leaders in AOSA from Ohio, Tim Staarman and Michelle Lesko, who met at The Ohio State University.

The final *Foresight* publication before my term ended featured the upcoming AOSA Congress in St. Louis, including a private reception for AOSA students at the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. The President's column covered the year's activities which included the regionalization of the NBEO and the proposed 'practical' third portion, an AOA Fellowship proposal for a Master's Program in Business in conjunction with the AOA and the school in St Louis, the development of referral centers in optometry such as the OMNI referral centers, and a comprehensive list of post-graduate residencies – the feature of the November publication that year.<sup>4</sup> There were at that time, many residencies available as an option for students in the areas of Pediatric, Geriatric, Contact Lens, Low Vision, VA Hospital, Primary Care, Vision Therapy and Referral Center Residencies.

In reviewing the documents from my time of serving as AOSA President, I came across names of those previously involved such as Drs. Ferrucci and Myers. I also noticed names of individuals involved in AOSA that went on to serve on the AOA staff, such as Beth Kneib, some who have served in educational roles in various schools – one of which became a recent dean of an optometry school, Kelley Nichols, some who have served in their state associations (too many to name), some that serve in industry, some serving in the military and public health organizations, and even some who have gone on to serve in their state legislatures and Congress! It demonstrates that AOSA is an extremely important and valuable organization for the profession of

optometry. It is a place for those who want to contribute, foremost a vehicle for productive maturation for individuals to gain experience in leadership.

The following January would mark the end of my term as AOSA President during the St Louis AOSA Congress and would feature an important milestone in AOSA history – the election of the first female AOSA President, Beth Kneib. In fact, the entire executive committee would be all female for the first time in the history of the organization!

### References

1. AOSA Name and Address List for Trustees and Liaisons, 1984-85.
2. Ed Bennett email to the author, June 11, 2017.
3. Nelson D. President's column. *AOSA Foresight*, April, 1984;14(2).
4. Nelson D. President's column. *AOSA Foresight*, November, 1984;14(4).

### Note

AOSA published a newsletter distributed to all student members called *Foresight*, which was renamed from the *American Optometric Student Review* during the late 1970's. Two of its issues served as references 3 and 4 for this paper.