The Oral Health Alliance paid homage to Dr. Anthony Volpe at its recent annual gala, held once again in Chicago.

A man of commitment and honor, Volpe is worthy of recognition, with endless achievements, including a recent trip to Israel to assist in Dr. D. Walter Cohen’s initiative, “Bridges to Peace.” Volpe has been involved in Israel’s oral health development for more than 20 years, supporting among other things both the Hebrew Dental School and the Palestinian Dental School. The two schools are known for their program that enables students to switch schools to interchange knowledge — truly building bridges to peace.

Often when an organization honors an individual, it is with great preceding fanfare, in part to draw a large contingent of supporters to help make the event an enthusiastic affair and financial success. In this instance, to its credit, the Oral Health Alliance did not announce the honor prior to the meeting. Yet even without advance notice, the vast room was filled to capacity with Volpe admirers. Donations to OHA’s charitable efforts were flowing, much of it via an auction that raised funds supporting OHA’s efforts to advocate for and deliver oral health to the world’s most underserved populations.

The award presented to Volpe is truly commendable, honoring a man who has encouraged all aspects of dentistry and oral health for his entire professional life — all with generosity, humbleness, enthusiasm and grace. He and his wife of more than 50 years, Marlene, have always lived as an example of decency. His leadership role in research with Colgate-Palmolive led the way to so many positive products and services of immeasurable benefit to the public’s oral health. When it was time to pass the baton to continue Colgate’s contribution to society and the business of oral health, Volpe accomplished the task like a father handing off to a son, remaining available as a loyal contributor — with insights and opinions when asked. He is a born leader. A champion of decency, faithfulness and leadership. He readily praises the many teachers and others who helped form him as they furthered the field of dentistry, including notables such as Dr. J. Manheim, Dr. A. Dragnoni and Dr. D. Walter Cohen. Volpe has supported all areas of dentistry, including through his involvement with the International Academy for Dental Facial Esthetics and schools such as Rutgers.

When the gala evening commenced, Volpe graciously took me to his table and sat me next to him — surrounded by some of the ADA’s top leaders and their spouses. It was just a few years ago that Volpe raised $29 million for the ADA Foundation, specifically earmarking the funds solely for increasing dental health and delivering associated information to dentists, dental students and the public — not for marketing or lobbying.

A telling anecdote illustrates Volpe’s character: When this deeply religious man obtained a personal meeting with the Pope, he used the visit to speak of providing toothbrushes and improved oral health to countries with the greatest need.

The Oral Health Alliance presented Volpe with this honor not to recognize research, business acumen and service in advancing oral health, but to simply say “thank you” to a classy, wonderful individual who just so happens — to our good fortune — to be a dentist. As Dr. Milke and JoAnn Alfano so succinctly said, “(We) and the professional field thank you for your leadership, achievements, generosity, integrity — but most of all — for your friendship.” Personally, I am fortunate to have Tony as a friend and colleague. The OHA filled the vast room to honor him without financial magnetism and without prior announcement. I personally, professionally — and as a friend — just wish to add my own, “Thank you uncle Tony.”