Down to the wire: One student’s journey into residency

flourish with the advent of television shows such as “Extreme Makeover,” where viewers watch as doctors, dentists and physical therapists drastically improve an individual’s physical appearance. As evident from the response of the program participants, these makeovers yield enthusiasm and markedly higher self-confidence levels. As a reflection of American television, parents are seeking orthodontic therapy for their children to improve smiles and self-esteem. Parents themselves are undergoing treatment with products such as Invisalign® and ceramic brackets without looking like they have “metal mouths.” The AAO estimates that more than 1 million adults per year are receiving treatment from orthodontists (who are members of the AAO) in the United States and Canada.¹

I was no different. My personal interest in studying orthodontics originated during my own orthodontic treatment. As a senior in high school, I coped socially, overtaken with extreme difference from having a class III malocclusion, and being in the prime of my teenage years, feelings of embarrassment over my crooked smile overwhelmed me. After years of orthodontic treatment, I felt a refreshing rush of self-confidence accompanied with elation when my braces were removed. The indescribable and overwhelming feeling further solidified my decision to pursue dentistry. These experiences were merely the beginning of an arduous period of constant studying, and so began the trying eight months ahead. Juggling three pre-clinical labs and PBL sessions and spending the remainder of my time at the library brushing up on the Krebs’ cycle and renal pathology daunted me.

After eight long months, the day of the exam finally arrived. Butterflies fluttered in my abdomen, and tiny beads of sweat formed on my forehead while walking through the doors into the exam room. Take a deep breath and relax. Just breathe.

After achieving a successful National Boards score, the hardest part should have been over. Wrong. Another exam required for consideration by many orthodontic programs is the Graduate Record Examination (GRE), a test that evaluates a candidate’s skills in math, reading and writing which required as much preparation as the NBDE.

Becoming involved in leadership activities and volunteering my time to better the neighboring Los Angeles community were very important to me. USC hosts the “Ayuda Clinic,” which is one of the community outreach programs that provide free dental care to children living in underserved areas within Los Angeles and Orange counties. One Saturday per month, dental and pre-dental students from USC administer clinics at various venues, such as at elementary schools, community centers and assisted-living communities. Inside, the clinic is organized into various stations: diagnosis, radiology, anesthesia and rubber dam, operative, “the pit” for supplies and sterilization. Several times throughout the year, Ayuda travels to an international site. Over the past seven years, USC faculty and students have treated nearly 9,000 people from Belize, Mexico, Costa Rica and Guatemala.¹

It was at an Ayuda clinic where I proudly performed my very first dental procedure — a sealant. Students gain a great deal of dental experience by volunteering for these clinics; many students administer their first injection, which can be very daunting. Such extracurricular dental school projects are instrumental for improving the student’s confidence, ability and dexterity. That sealant and injection would lead me to greater success as dental school continued.

I am currently beginning my fourth year of dental school, and the entire curriculum involves rotations and treating patients in the clinic atmosphere. Extracurricular activities and student government consume the majority of my time, and the need for a punctual graduation still looms. USC’s didactic program prepares its students to be excellent clinicians, and it is clearly evident why — the clinical requirements are extremely demanding. USC has an admirable philosophy: Students should be competent general dentists before they can become great specialists. With overseeing comprehensive patient care, participating in abundant community activities and taking advantage of research opportunities, the remaining time surely will pass quickly.

The newest application cycle has already begun. Balancing time working in clinic, being involved in extracurricular activities and applying to various externships leave me with a very demanding schedule. As I apply, I hope to one day join the prestigious community of doctors who specialize in orthodontics. 

References

About the author
Ms. Donna N. Lieu will graduate in 2008 from the University of Southern California, School of Dentistry (DDS). Her professional accomplishments include: USC Class Council and Academic Committee and Secretary of Communications for 2008 as well as volunteer, Ayuda Dental Outreach Program. She graduated from University of California, San Diego (B.S.), with a major in biochemistry and cell biology, and orthodontic externships at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Va., and University of California at Los Angeles, Los Angeles. As a student at the USC School of Dentistry, Ms. Lieu received the following awards and honors: Dean’s List, 2005 and 2006, Order of Omega Greek Honor Society, 2005 and the Aler E. Ardis Scholarship from UCSD. She is fluent in Vietnamese and Spanish and enjoys photography, fiction novels, cooking, exercise and dance classes.

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