

**SPEECH DELIVERED BY STANLEY BERGMAN
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“THE HUMAN TOUCH IN DIGITAL WORLD”

Thank you, Dean Guthmiller, for that kind introduction and for the opportunity to address the 2023 graduating class of The University of North Carolina Adams School of Dentistry. This is your first graduating class as dean of the school, and I am honored to share the stage with you.

Let me start by offering my congratulations to today’s graduates. Your hard work has paid off! And even heartier congratulations to the families of the graduates, whose support has been essential to your achievement.

You may be wondering why Dean Guthmiller and the UNC administration invited me to speak with you today. I am an accountant and a businessperson, not a dentist. That is a fair question. And here is my answer – In one very real way, the key to success as a businessperson or a dentist or a leader in academia is the same ability to connect with people.

I have been in business for almost 50 years and – dare I say it? – I installed the first fax machine at Henry Schein. Many of you may not even know what that is. Suffice it to say, the technology tools I grew up with are very different than the ones available to you today. So, to present you with a commencement address that is current and relevant to you, we asked ChatGPT, with all its artificial intelligence, this question: “What is the optimal length of a commencement speech to dental students?” “32 seconds.” For the non-dentists in the crowd, that is one second for each tooth. I am from a different generation, so my remarks will be longer than 32 seconds, but I will try to keep it tight.

We live in a world that is increasingly driven by technology. Thanks to these technology advances, the dental profession today looks very different than when I joined Henry Schein or even a decade ago. Today we have digital scanners; 2D and 3D imaging; 3D printing; advanced implants, aligners, and dental materials; lasers; clinical software with AI embedded for diagnostic support; and rapid salivary diagnostics to detect oral cancer, which are already saving lives. These digital tools have improved the efficiency of how dentists take clinical outcomes to new heights and enhance the patient experience, making dental visits more efficient and comfortable. And with the arrival of artificial intelligence, the change will only accelerate.

All this new technology is worth celebrating. But – and this is a big one – we must remember that technology can’t replace the human touch and the human need for connection between the health care practitioner and the patient. Your patients will want a human connection from you, and the good news is that through the efficiency of

technology, you will have more time to make that human connection. Remember, technology is just a tool. Humans wield that tool. And how we wield that tool depends on our human touch.

Here are two quick stories from two great mentors in my life to make this lesson more tangible. My parents had a small department store in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, where I was born and raised. My late mother was a physically petite woman with a towering personality, and she was key to the fabric of the store. The products in the store were no different than the products sold in other stores. So why did people shop there? Because my parents made every customer feel welcome in the store. They greeted customers and offered to help their customers. They knew their customers' families. That extra effort to connect on a human level was the secret to their success. As my mother always said, "It's all about people."

Similarly, a decade after leaving home, I met the late Jay Schein, the son of Henry Schein. I had the privilege of working with Jay for nine years before his untimely passing at a very young age. Jay was a great visionary who laid the foundation for the modern Henry Schein. Jay took my late mother's lesson a step further when he came up with this line: "This is what we are really about: A concern for people and a concern for results."

A human connection is at the heart of all social relationships. More than 200 years ago, the English poet John Keats wrote, "Touch has a memory," and that truth is as relevant now as it was two centuries ago. In dentistry or any other facet of society, it is the human connection that we remember. In this digitized world, the concern for people – the human connection in the practice of dentistry – will always be critically important in at least five areas I would like to discuss today: in caring for patients; in building and mentoring your office team; in collaborating with other health care professionals; in giving back to society; and in human dreaming, the essential ingredient for success.

We cannot underestimate the importance of the human touch in caring for patients. In your chair, the patient is vulnerable and puts trust and confidence in you. While the practice of dentistry is based on science, it is really all about caring for your patients. As a North Carolina Dental graduate, you have been trained to deliver care with compassion and the human connection. The motto of this school – "Transforming Dentistry for Better Health" – aligns perfectly with this imperative.

I have my own personal experience with the human touch in a health care setting. A few years ago, I had successful back surgery at a small local hospital on Long Island, not at one of the big, famous institutions in New York City, which are excellent, of course. My wife Marion returned to that same small hospital for a similar operation soon after mine. We chose our surgeons not only because they had a great clinical reputation, but also because they, together with their team, were warm and caring and we could relate to them as individuals. Although my surgery was considered fairly routine, for me, this surgery was a huge event. We planned around the surgery for weeks, and involved many members of our

family and friends to help in the lead-up and my recovery. Our surgeons and the team at the hospital invested time and compassionate energy to ensure that we felt supported. As exciting as today's technology is, it cannot replace the squeeze of a hand, a caring word of comfort delivered from the heart, or a hug.

The human touch also is essential in your relationships with your dental team members. As you careers progress, your dental team will look to you for guidance – on their clinical skills, on working with patients, and on building their careers. You will need to be a supportive mentor, coach, and facilitator. You will be viewed as the leader of the clinical team in your operatory and the CEO of the practice. And I encourage you to apply an important leadership lesson that I learned when I was a teenager helping to organize summer camps in Port Elizabeth. That experience taught me to be optimistic and always look for the good in people. And most importantly, that everyone should contribute to the mission. The best summer camp leader gets everyone on the team involved. Even today as a CEO, I still strive to apply the lessons I learned as a camp counselor – to treat people how you want to be treated, to recognize that there is a role for everyone, that every person can make a difference, and to engage everyone in the mission. At summer camp, I learned the importance of the human connection. That lesson is as applicable to a business leader and a dental practitioner as it is for a summer camp counselor. And it underscores the importance of the human connection when leading your dental team in your operatory, or your laboratory, if you pick a career in research, or in the classroom, if you pursue a career in academia.

Another area where the human touch is important is in interdisciplinary collaboration between oral health and the other health care disciplines. For decades, dentists were viewed as being separate and apart from other health care professionals, but I am pleased to say that this separation is continually being bridged. Dentistry is a vital component of the health care spectrum, with studies increasingly showing the direct correlation between good oral care and good overall health. With this knowledge has come the rise of collaborative, integrated care teams that are focused on wellness and prevention, on increasing health literacy, and on advancing health equity. I also read recently of the integration of clinical pharmacy into the Adams School of Dentistry's clinics, which is a great step forward.

During your career, it is likely that the barriers between dentists and other health care professionals will be lowered, and you will be working closely with professionals across many other health care disciplines to advance collaborative and compassionate care for your patients. By making a human connection during this collaborative care process, you will help advance the truth that oral health is clearly linked to overall health.

The human touch also will make a difference in giving back to society. Graduating with a degree from the Adams School of Dentistry is a wonderful achievement, and each person graduating today has the opportunity to be a great dentist. But I would like to challenge you today to go even further and use your skills, your compassion – your ability to make a

human connection – to make a difference in society. In my career, I have benefitted by adopting the philosophy of enlightened self-interest conceived by Benjamin Franklin and best described as doing well professionally by doing good for society. My parents always instilled in my brother and me the importance of making a difference in the lives of others. This has made all the difference in my career.

This graduating class is already inclined to do this by establishing a human connection. In February, the Adams School of Dentistry hosted its 10th annual “Give Kids A Smile Day” and that treated more than 180 underserved children. And Adams School of Dentistry faculty and alumni are helping to spearhead a pilot program to provide better oral health care for underserved people in western North Carolina. Giving back to society deepens your sense of compassion and connection to your own patients.

So, here is my last thought on the importance of the human connection in the digital world. Computers, for all their power, do not dream – only humans dream. And our dreams are made real through socializing our visions, hard work, and our human touch. My North Star has been the line that the late Senator Robert Kennedy made famous: “Some men (and women) see things as they are and say, ‘Why?’ I dream things that never were and say, ‘Why not?’” If we “think big,” we may achieve goals that appear nearly impossible. I have come to realize that “Why not?” is one of the most important questions to continually ask oneself throughout life. I followed what the poet Robert Frost referenced as “the road less travelled,” and that has made all the difference for me. I wanted to be in business but also wanted to join a company committed to making the world a better place. No computer, no AI, no ChatGPT could have enabled me to dream and live out my dream.

In conclusion, what links the best dental practitioners across the decades, and will continue to be the defining quality of the best dentists in the future, is the ability to establish a caring human connection: in treating patients, in building and mentoring your office team, in collaborating with other health care professionals, in giving back to society, and in dreaming about the future. More than anything else, your patients will remember how you made them feel, so make every interaction count! This truth is summed up in this thought from the great American poet, Maya Angelou: “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

You have the opportunity to take the road less travelled, to dream big, and to use the human connection to contribute to society in your own unique way. That is my challenge to you today – Dream big! Ask “Why not?” As you sit here today, the idea of balancing the power of digital technology with a human connection may sound challenging, possibly even impossible. But we should always keep in mind the most important lesson from my personal hero, the late South African President Nelson Mandela: “It always seems impossible until it’s done.” And nothing is impossible for a graduate of the University of North Carolina Adams School of Dentistry. Congratulations again, and thank you for inviting me to share this special day with you.