D. Walter Cohen:
An iconic icon

By David L. Hoexter, DMD, FACD, FICD, Editor in Chief

The American Academy of Periodontology will dedicate its annual meeting this year to Dr. D. Walter Cohen at a ceremony in Philadelphia on Sept. 29. This honor is more than well deserved and prompted me to remember the column I wrote about Dr. Cohen in the March 2010 Dental Tribune. Dr. Cohen recently spent time again coordinating the dental schools in Jerusalem, with the apparent theme, “Education to Peace.” I hope you are able to attend the AAP meeting and the ceremony honoring this remarkable individual and friend. Enjoy the column once again.

Each generation has a different concept of what a true icon is in temporary culture. D. Walter Cohen is such an icon of dentistry. He is a pinnacle of energy and accomplishment with a glitter of recognition. Even today, in his 88s, he will play tennis early in the morning before he practices periodontics at his office.

He understands the “gestalt” of life. For example, he talks about Dr. Harry Sichler, author of “Bone on Bones: Fundamental of bone biology,” as not only being a great orthopedist but someone who loves music and catching butterflies as well.

Cohen makes the time and effort to enhance the lives of others and to encourage peace through education and understanding. Sharing his vision through unselfish seeds of giving, Cohen fertilizes the seeds with education and an interchange of knowledge.

With his nurturing, the seedlings grow into trees with strong roots and wide branches with spreading leaves. It is underneath the shade of these leaves that people learn and share knowledge.

He even manages to open eyes and ears that have been waxed shut through years of prejudice and ignorance.

In 1967, Cohen established the D. Walter Cohen Middle East Center for Dental Education in Israel at Jerusalem’s Hebrew University. Today, it continues to set the tone of learning for citizens across the world. It also allows for the exchange of dental students at Hebrew University with the students at the Al-Quds School of Dentistry in Jerusalem. This exchange illustrates true sharing between Israeli and Palestinians in Jerusalem by stressing knowledge, human compassion and understanding.

Cohen is a passionate man who has given the world a real opportunity to enhance peace efforts and change humanity through education and understanding.

Cohen is also helping to make strides in lowering the number of preterm, low birth weight babies. He is guiding the treatment and cure of periodontal disease during pregnancy, especially among pregnant teenagers.

This may be a major step in order to lower the number of preterm, low birth weight babies. A favorite phrase of his is that “we have to keep trying so we can break through the glass ceiling.”

Cohen helped establish the University of Pennsylvania’s first department of periodontics and served as its first chair. Growing from professor to dean, Cohen advanced new concepts and raised educational standards.

During his career he has found the time to write and publish 22 books and hundreds of articles. Despite his busy schedule, he finds the time to serve as dean emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania’s School of Dental Medicine.

Among his many honors, he has received the Legion of Merit from France, was named president of the Medical College of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Pennsylvania Diabetes Academy, president of the National Museum of American Jewish History and chancellor emeritus of Drexel University College of Medicine. These are just a few examples of the awards and leadership recognition that he has received.

When I asked Cohen what he saw as his greatest achievement, he instantly replied, “my family.” The response would likely be of no surprise to his daughters. Proudly, he also described the wonderful family home in which he was raised, noting that his father was the first periodontist in Philadelphia.

It was clear from the way he spoke that the encouragement and love that his family gave to him made it easy for him to give so much back.

If the question were posed to me as to who and what is an icon in dentistry, I would swiftly reply, “D. Walter Cohen.”

AAP meeting honors Dr. D. Walter Cohen

The program guide for the 2013 American Academy of Periodontology annual meeting opens with the statement, “This year’s Annual Meeting is dedicated to Dr. D. Walter Cohen, world-renowned periodontist who has dedicated his life to the specialty.”

A full page is then used to list a few of the many highlights in Cohen’s storied career, including his role in establishing the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine department of periodontics and serving the school as a professor, associate dean and, ultimately, dean.

The tribute closes with references to some of Cohen’s more recent educational activities and concludes with this update: “Dr. Cohen currently serves as professor emeritus and dean emeritus of the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. He continues to practice periodontics in Philadelphia, in the same practice his father, Abram, began 70 years ago.”

The AAP Foundation Signature Recognition Event and Awards Ceremony, in honor of Dr. D. Walter Cohen, is Sept. 29 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The ticketed event helps support the AAP Foundation’s education and research activities.

(Source: AAP)