

ANNUAL REPORT
2022 - 2023

MISSION

To improve health and quality of life by preparing the next generation of oral health care professionals and scientists, providing the highest quality, evidence-based oral health care serving New Jersey and communities worldwide, and advancing health through discovery and innovation.

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A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Some say the first impression is also the last impression. This is especially true for our profession. As dentists, we are sometimes feared, loved, and occasionally dreaded. However, I would like to think that how our patients feel about us can be altered by how we approach them. Like having that one great teacher or mentor who made you love a subject and changed your perception or trajectory forever.

Because of this, a core component of a Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) education is not only teaching students how to take great dental impressions and deliver the best possible care but also how to make a lasting impression. Our classes prepare students to engage with patients from all walks of life. We teach students to be culturally competent, empathetic, and patient-centered. We also create numerous opportunities for them to employ these skills at our clinics, community service programs, and mission trips. We want our students to learn more than pure dentistry at RSDM and aim to create mutually beneficial experiences for RSDMers and our patients.

For close to two decades now, the dental school has been holding mission trips to the Indian Health Services in the Black Hills of South Dakota, providing oral health care for Native Americans. I've been lucky enough to go on that trip recently and witness the incredible work that our students are doing under the leadership of Assistant Professor Robert Shekitka. I saw how trusted they are in the Native American community. Although a new cohort of rising fourth-year volunteers goes on the trip each year, I think it's the impressions made by former students that preset the warm welcome for the next group coming in. It's always new faces, but the same, familiar compassion. This was such a proud moment for me as an oral health care provider, teacher, and dean of the school.

There are so many other anecdotes I can share with you regarding impressions. In the next pages of this report, you will find stories about other ways that RSDM is making a positive impact on the wider world and anyone they encounter. We are so lucky to have countless passionate individuals who strive to better our school, dentistry, education, and oral health care. I'm impressed with the caliber of our faculty and staff and their commitment. Our students are smart, dedicated, and kindhearted. I am awestruck by our community and the work that happens here and am grateful to work alongside every one of you.

Warm regards,
Cecile A. Feldman, DMD, MBA
Dean and Distinguished Professor, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine



A MESSAGE FROM THE CHANCELLOR

Ten years ago, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) along with seven other schools, five research institutes, and two clinical care units, united under one roof, becoming what's now known as Rutgers Health. As we celebrate this momentous occasion, I want to reflect on RSDM's indispensable role in our achievements.

RSDM stands as a beacon of exemplary patient care, leaving an indelible mark on the community and annually receiving over 136,000 patient visits. In 2014, the School opened the Delta Dental of New Jersey Special Care Center to provide comprehensive treatment to patients with special needs. A year later, the \$13 million state-funded dental-specialty center opened to integrate patient care into one clinic. In 2016, the New Brunswick faculty practice was established. That same year, a new state-of-the-art sterilization facility began operating. Continuing a legacy of providing care to underserved communities, the School started two new programs, the Holocaust Survivors Program and VETSmile Program, adding to its Ryan White Oral Health Services Program. The digital dentistry initiative started in 2017 as well, with a new center opening in 2021.

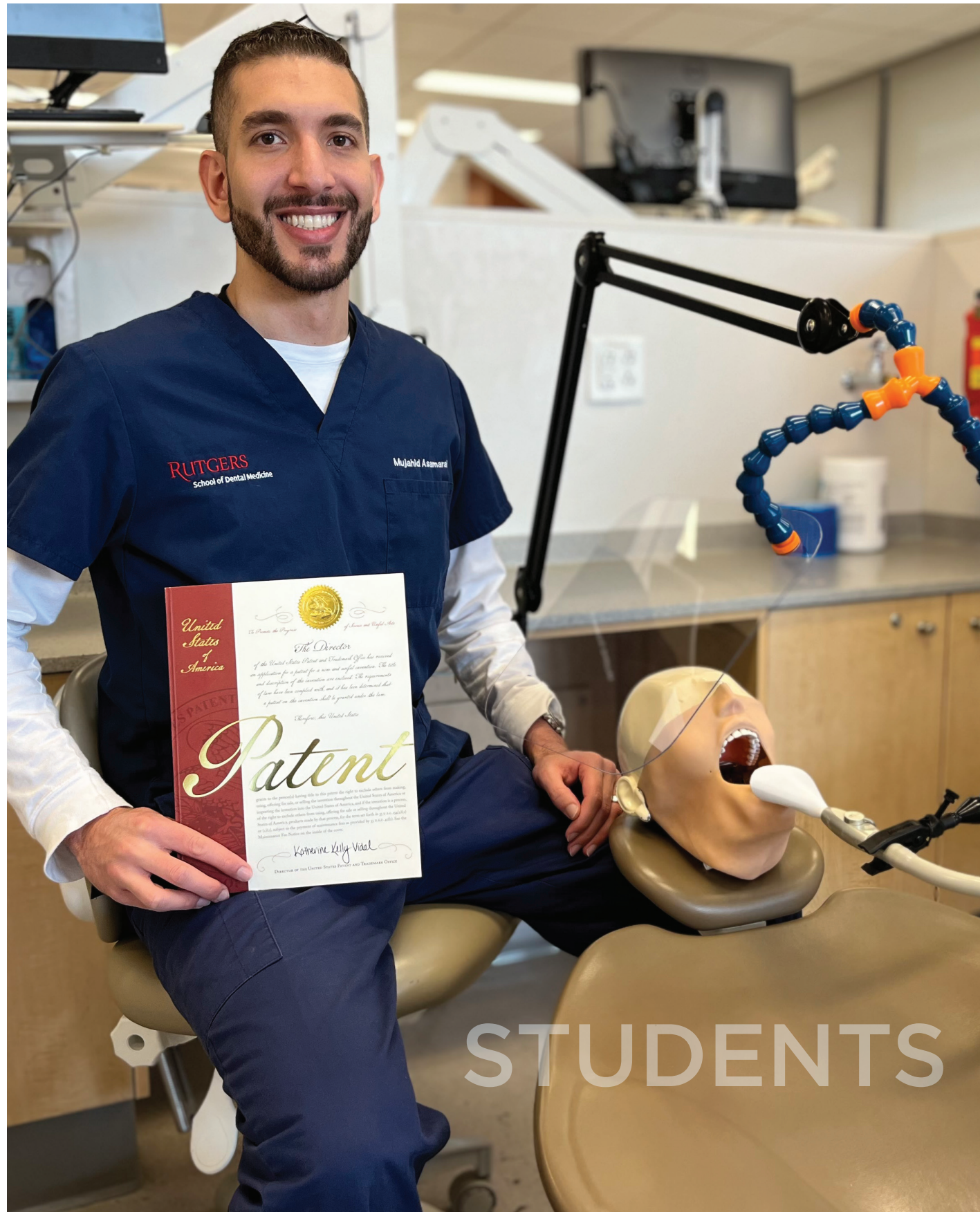
The School has also made remarkable advancements in research. RSDM opened a \$16 million research facility, where scientists work on treatments for cancer, systemic illnesses, oral health diseases, and more. As an epidemiologist, I've been impressed with RSDM's work during the pandemic, finding evidence that mouthwash might prevent COVID-19 transmission. Dean Cecile Feldman received a \$11.7 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to study alternatives to opioids.

Significant enhancements have been made to the dental curriculum, fortifying it with valuable knowledge and skills to meet the evolving demands of the profession. RSDM has been developing interprofessional education programs to train health professionals to work together. Collectively at Rutgers Health, we have also benefitted from RSDM's leadership on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and in many other ways.

Though a decade may appear as only a drop in history, RSDM seized this period to achieve remarkable strides. The legacy RSDM is building and the impressions it is making on the community will live far beyond this decade. With eager anticipation, I look forward to witnessing the School's trajectory over the next decade.

Sincerely,
Brian L. Strom, MD, MPH
Chancellor, Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences
Executive Vice President for Health Affairs at Rutgers University





STUDENTS



An RSDM education gives students purpose and tools to touch upon the lives of others through dentistry and make a difference. It teaches them how to make everlasting impressions in the clinic, classroom, or community.

First-year Student Gets Patent

A former mechanical engineer, Mujahid Asamarai '26 is trained to solve problems. Knowing this, his brother Muath Asamarai, a dentist in Minnesota, turned to him when he needed help exploring ways to protect his patients and staff against COVID. Mujahid Asamarai was up for the challenge.

"[My brother] really wanted to make people feel safe," said Asamarai, who flew out to assist on-site. At the time, he had quit his job as an engineer in a medical device company to shift careers and was immersed in a postbaccalaureate program, preparing for dental school.

That Minnesota trip led Asamarai to the most unexpected place: his first patent.

The brothers first installed shields around the office and implemented fogging among other measures. However, the main

concern was the aerosol produced by motorized instruments, like a dental drill and an ultrasonic scaler, that can carry viruses and bacteria. To mitigate aerosol spread, the duo looked for a readily available product but couldn't find anything suitable.

"That's when I thought, this shouldn't be this hard," said Asamarai. He began designing a solution in a computer-aided design program. Next, he got off-the-shelf parts and printed the rest with his brother's 3D printer. Within a few weeks, he created the Dental Aerosol Protection System.

The system, now patented by Asamarai, is twofold. First, an adjustable, self-balancing shield goes in between the patient and practitioner to block aerosols from the patient's mouth. Second, a 3D-printed aerosol collection funnel, which can be plugged into a dental chair's high-volume suction, absorbs aerosols coming out of the patient's mouth.

This simple yet crucial setup felt like any other solution Asamarai found. "It was only until discussing with family that they said, 'if nothing like it exists on the market, maybe you should consider patenting it,'" he said.

He took the advice and filed the patent, which was granted in December 2022. The Dental Aerosol Protection System is still in use at his brother's office as well as a few other dental offices in New Jersey.

Asamarai's love of working with his hands was what led him to engineering, and the desire to help people was why he went into the medical device industry. But he yearned for the opportunity to

work more with his hands and experience a more direct patient interaction.

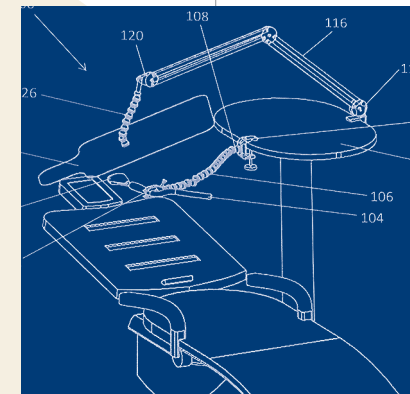
When he saw his brother using a CAD/CAM scanner and milling machine—both of which he was familiar with from engineering school—to prepare and deliver a same-day crown, he was

"blown away." "My brother was explaining to me the engineering, the design behind it," recalled Asamarai. "That really drew me into dentistry."

Now he is a first-year student in RSDM's DMD program. "I want to become an amazing dentist," he said, "and I came to Rutgers because of its strong reputation of producing some of the best [dentists]."

He has already been learning a lot.

In his "Fixed Digital Prosthodontics" class, he was introduced to the Computerized Assessment Laboratory, where he could scan his own crown preps and assess them digitally. "It was very cool, and we're fortunate to get exposed to this technology early," he said. "I love digital dentistry and the innovative side of it. I want to always be on the cutting edge."



As Foresight Leaders, Second-Years Guide the New Class

Dental school is a journey filled with quizzes, quests, and questions. But from the beginning, RSDM students aren't alone in their expedition.

During orientation, a group of second-year students steps up to mentor the incoming class as part of the Foresight Program, which found life with Vice Dean Kim Fenesy's efforts decades ago. Foresight leaders organize events, provide study tips, and offer guidance to the incoming class not only in their first few days but also throughout their first year. In this cycle, 10 leaders supported the 91 first-year predoctoral candidates.

"Students selected to the program represent the values and the mission of the school and the profession," said Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Diversity, and Inclusion, Herminio Perez, who oversees Foresight.

Two leaders and the program's co-chairs were New Jersey natives Matthew Amador and Kinga Dabek. Starting RSDM during the pandemic, Dabek recalled how everything felt uncertain. Then, she virtually met her Foresight leader. "She was



always like a rock to reach out to if I had any questions—from that first email all the way through my D1 year," she said.

Now, as a Foresight leader, Dabek tries to be a rock for the new class.

"One of my favorite things about being a Foresight leader is seeing their excitement and passion about dentistry, but also being able to guide them with the transition," she said. "We always try to maintain communication with them so that they feel comfortable reaching out to us."

Foresight leaders also conduct surveys to match each first-year with a second-year student as part of "The Bigs and

The Littles" program for one-on-one mentorship and for developing friendships.

Said Amador, "I very much did enjoy my orientation." But he also noticed ways to improve the program for the next cohort. "As the year progressed and I saw myself growing as a dental student, I realized I would be a great person to help make those changes... and pass on my methods for success and what I learned to all the newer students."

One of the new additions he facilitated was a trip to a minor league baseball game attended by over 50 first-year students. "That was the best turnout at a social event I've seen here," he said. They also organized trivia and played icebreakers games. This year's leaders also tried to introduce every member of the class to each other by rotating groups throughout the activities.

Being a Foresight leader was also beneficial for Amador. He developed new friendships with other leaders. The program enabled him to reflect on his first year, think about what went right, and pass those on to others.

"I'm going to have a better second year than I otherwise would have," he said, "and that's thanks to a program like this, so D2s and D1s benefit equally."



FUTURE LEADER RECOGNIZED

Joy Chang '24 has been awarded the Oral Health Foundation of the Pierre Fauchard Academy's Student Scholarship Award for her great potential to become an outstanding leader in the dental profession. She received her certificate from Professor of Diagnostic Sciences Carmine LoMonaco.

TEHRAN TO NEW JERSEY: Pediatric Dentist Chases Dreams

Since high school, Iranian native Ali Baghalian dreamt of a U.S. education. But economic constraints held him back. He attended dental school in his home country, where public schools are free, and launched his career there.

Two years ago, his dreams came true when he enrolled in RSDM's Pediatric Dentistry Postgraduate Program.

"The moment I got the match result on my email is one that I will never forget in my life," he said with excitement. "If I didn't do this, I was going to be ashamed of myself that I didn't dare to do it."

In 2011, Baghalian obtained his pediatric dentistry degree. Following graduation, he became faculty at Tehran University and discovered his passion for teaching. "I really like to teach clinical techniques to young dental students," said Baghalian, who taught for a decade. This experience benefitted him, too. "It keeps me up to date by studying, papers, textbooks, everything."

In 2016, he opened his own practice while still teaching. With bettering



economical means, he decided to follow his dream to the U.S. He applied for pediatric dentistry programs around the country in 2020. He found out that from close to 100 programs, only a handful accepted foreign-trained dentists, one being RSDM. "Rutgers was my first choice," he said.

Diversity of students is one of the best aspects of the RSDM's Pediatric Dentistry Postdoctoral Program, noted Glenn Rosivack, department chair. "We train individuals from across the globe," he said. "We also accept students with a wide range of experience into our program."

"After Dr. Baghalian restored a fractured permanent incisor for a patient in our clinic, the supervising faculty member commented that it was truly a work of art."

In Baghalian's case, he came in as a proficient pediatric dentist. "His experience is evident in the treatment he provides for our patients," said Rosivack. "After Dr. Baghalian restored a fractured permanent incisor for a patient in our clinic, the supervising faculty member commented that it was truly a work of art."

At RSDM, he has been building on his skill sets with help from role models like Rosivack. "I learn a lot from the way he talks and respects patients and residents," said Baghalian. "He is one of the most respectful men I have ever seen in my life."

As he approaches the final stretch of his RSDM journey, Baghalian is thinking about the future.

"I really want to continue as a faculty member in the United States," he said. "I don't know where I will finally end up, but this is in my mind."



FOUR RSDM STUDENTS RECEIVE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICES CORPS SCHOLARSHIP

Vanessa Bustos '26, Fabiola Cuba '24, Anna Aquine Kujaruk '24, and Kathryn Roeder '26 have been awarded the National Health Services Corps (NHSC) Scholarship, which provides financial support in exchange for practicing in communities with limited access to care after awardees obtain their degrees and licenses. Approximately 10 percent of the applications receive this competitive scholarship, according to NHSC's website.



Unconventional Path to RSDM

“We’re in this together, we’ve got to look out for each other. I have a sense of belonging and responsibility as a classmate to help and to be helped too.”

Many different routes bring students to RSDM. For Bo Hwan Wang, it was a long, meandering path with stops at a conservatory and then a theological seminary.

“I spent my 20s wondering, trying different things,” said the 31-year-old Wang, who taught guitar on the weekdays and worked as a youth pastor on the weekends.

But he felt like something was missing.

While he appreciated music and ministry, he wanted something more, something different, but didn’t know what it would be. With the guidance of his wife, a graduate student at Rutgers, he discovered his interest in dentistry.

He enrolled in the University of Pennsylvania’s pre-health postbaccalaureate program to complete the prerequisites for dental school. Coming from a nonscience background, he had a lot of catching up to do. “In chemistry, we talked about atoms. What’s a proton? What’s an electron? I had no idea. I forgot everything so I had to start

from scratch, learn everything, catch up, and be successful,” he said.

In the meantime, he also shadowed a dentist down in Princeton. “I knew dentistry was it,” he said, “but this confirmed it more.”

Following the program, he took the dental admissions test and immediately applied to RSDM. Wang is now a first-year student in the traditional DMD program.

In August, he arrived with excitement, which soon veered to fear after seeing the packed schedule. “My biggest fear was failing. I worked so hard to be here,” he said. “But then I made good friends, and a lot of people help me.”

Asking for help was something new to Wang. He used to study alone and never really thought about reaching out to faculty or classmates for support. “I realized you can’t do solo here,” said Wang. “There’s 90 of us. Emotionally, physically, and mentally, we all need each other. ... I feel like we are like an army. We’re in this together, we’ve got to look out for each other. I have a sense of belonging and responsibility as a classmate to help and to be helped too.”

Two semesters into his studies, he’s starting to see a connection between his interests.

“Looking back, music and seminary were like raw ingredients: meat and potatoes,” he said. “But dentistry is really what gives meaning and flavor to my past experiences.”

Music, he explained, instilled in him the discipline to be persistent. He also learned to use both hands to play an instrument, which gives him the manual dexterity needed for dentistry. The seminary showed him the meaning and importance of caring for others.

“I’m looking forward to using my previous experiences and gifts to reach out to patients with music, with theology, with care and love,” he said. “I’m excited to see how I’ll combine all these to have a more positive influence on people.”



Coated

The Class of 2026 and the internationally educated dentists in the Classes of 2024 and 2025 wore their white coats for the first time on May 2.



WITH DEXTER’S HELP

Meet **Dexter**, our radiology manikin. Here, he’s helping second-year students practice taking radiographs/X-rays.



OKU Grows with New Members

Fourth-year students **Domenico DiSalvo, Sarah Horne, Erik Smith, Eric Klipper, Ellen Rutner, Irene Kontogiannis, Chao Chen, and Sydney Pannella** were inducted to the national dental honor society Omicron Kappa Upsilon (OKU) Omega Omega Chapter as alumni members. This recognition is bestowed on no more than 12 percent of the graduating class based upon scholarship and potential for future contributions to dentistry. “Dr. William S. Kramer Award of Excellence” was given to George Soliman ’24. Matthew Cabana ’26 and Matthew Amador ’25 received the “Certificate of Academic Excellence.” Alekhya Thota from the Class of 2025 has been awarded the “Dr. Anthony R. Volpe Excellence in Research Award.” Additionally, Rosa Chaviano-Moran, associate dean for admissions and RSDM alumna, was inducted as a faculty member because of her contributions to dentistry.





RESEARCH



At RSDM, one of our goals is to advance oral health care through science and scientific discovery. Our groundbreaking work impacts many beyond New Jersey and the United States.

Education Enhanced by Research

Athena Fu '23 has always been interested in research. She enjoyed studying corals as a biological sciences major. When she completed her undergraduate degree, she thought her research career ended. But it has instead grown stronger at RSDM.

"Research has really enriched my dental school experience and was definitely something I didn't think I would get to experience," she said.

She also didn't foresee it would take her places.

Fu won first place among predoctoral students at the 2022 Balbo Day. This was "a really big honor," she said. Later,

"Doing research gave me an insider's look into that process....It definitely enriched how I approach dentistry."

she presented her poster at the Hinman Student Research Symposium, a national conference organized by the University of Tennessee for dental students and graduate to present their research.

"I'm very lucky to have been able to travel and represent our school in such a way," she said. "It was honestly very interesting because I don't think I realized the wide range of research that's being done."

Fu started doing research as part of RSDM's summer research program and put her name down. Eyeing orthodontics, she chose a project related to it and

began working with Wei Huang, assistant professor of orthodontics. Their project examined how well the digital scans used to make clear aligners match patients' actual teeth.

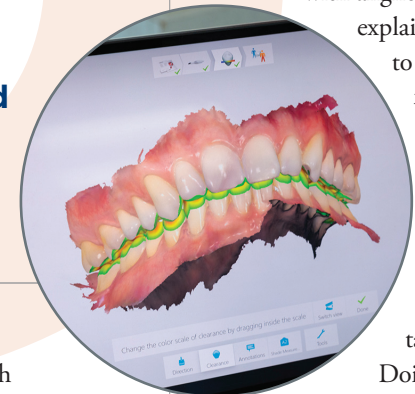
"Athena is a very enthusiastic and diligent student researcher," said Huang. "I really enjoyed working with her." Fu worked on 3D data analysis, superimposing printed models with scans of the patient's mouth to assess how they fit. "She was able to acquire a large amount of data first and then extract meaningful results," noted Huang. "Her work has contributed significantly and added an important layer of confirmation to our finding that the maxillary lateral incisors' tooth size changes in 3D printed dental models may be the underlying mechanisms by which these teeth often track poorly—don't hold on to the trays—during aligner therapy."

This kind of real-life impact of research is what attracted Fu to pursue it.

"I love this project provides a possible understanding of a problem that's faced with aligner therapy," Fu explained. "It's important to do and know research because it tells why we incorporate certain types of treatments and the evidence behind techniques we're taught in school."

Doing research gave me an insider's look into that process....It definitely enriched how I approach dentistry."

Starting RSDM's orthodontics postgraduate program, "I hope more students partake in research just because it's another facet of dentistry that they don't necessarily get to experience if they don't take the initiative to go out and take that opportunity."



Revitalizing Teeth Through Tissue Regeneration

Each year, dentists in the United States perform more than 15 million root canals on infected teeth, removing the inflamed pulp and filling the emptied canal with inert materials such as rubber and cement. What remains is a mineral shell in place of a living tooth.

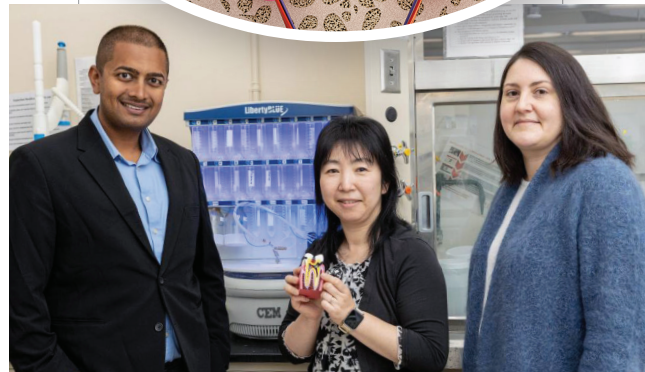
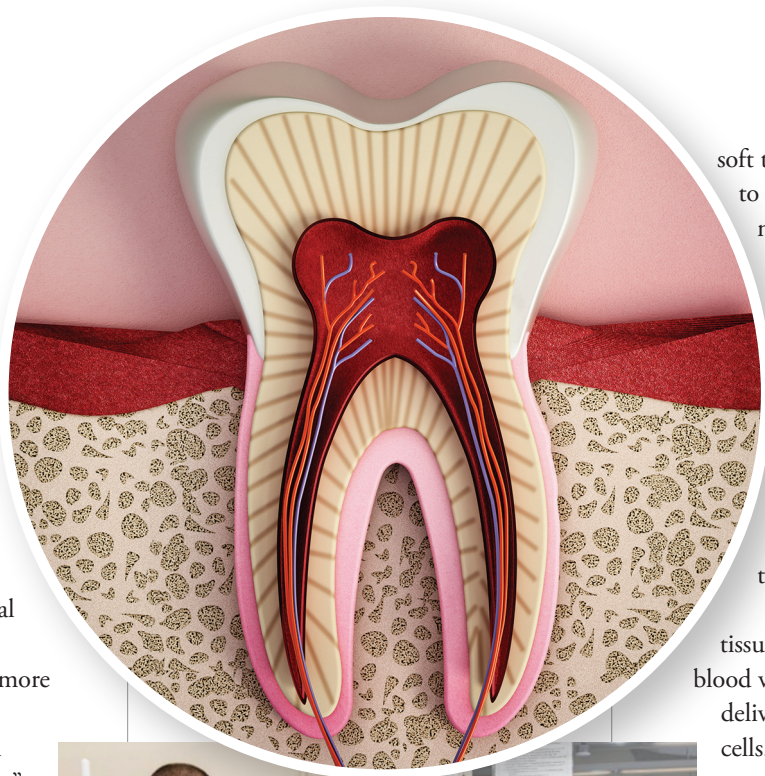
“Teeth lacking dental pulp are more vulnerable to cracking and can respond poorly to future bacterial infections and mechanical injuries,” said Vivek Kumar, a bioengineer at NJIT.

Backed by a \$3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health, Kumar, the principal investigator, and co-investigators Emi Shimizu and Carla Cugini at RSDM have proposed an alternative remedy: restoring the lost tissue in the tooth cavity by inducing the body to regenerate it. Their goal is to develop a materials-based therapy that doesn’t contain live cells and therefore could be sold off-the-shelf. It would be the first of its kind.

The team has created an injectable hydrogel designed to recruit a person’s own dental pulp stem cells directly to the disinfected cavity after a root canal. Composed of biocompatible amino acid peptides that aggregate into fibers, the hydrogel delivers biological cues to direct tissue growth, as well as a scaffold structure to support it.

There are presently no FDA-approved technologies that successfully restore native dental pulp.

A procedure known as over-instrumentation is performed on children’s immature permanent teeth with necrotic pulp, prompting new growth of the still-forming root by eliciting a healing



Researchers Vivek Kumar (left), Emi Shimizu, and Carla Cugini

response. The tissue outside of the emptied canal, when poked, forms blood clots that secrete a protein called growth factor that signals cells to produce new tissue to support the root. While some regrows, it is disorganized, lacks the needed tissue differentiation—including nerve cells—and fails to mimic soft tissue, said Shimizu, an endodontist that specializes in tissue regeneration.

By contrast, the team’s hydrogel therapy mimics the body’s own growth factor signaling, and, coupled with known antimicrobial mechanisms engineered into those materials, is capable of promoting tissue healing and regeneration.

In early animal clinical trials, dogs injected with the team’s hydrogels formed

soft tissue from the tooth apex to the crown in just under a month.

“We saw a lot of different tissues, including blood vessels, nerve bundles and pulp-like cells,” Kumar said, adding, “One of the primary goals of this project is to determine the type of cells that reorganize and repopulate the regenerated tissue.”

One of the core challenges tissue engineers faces is creating blood vasculature, the plumbing that delivers nutrients to regenerated cells. To address the problem, the team’s hydrogel contains a protein known as vascular endothelial growth factor that stimulates the growth of new blood vessels, noted Shimizu.

Cugini, a microbiologist who studies oral microbial biofilms, focuses on another critical component of the therapy: inhibiting harmful bacterial growth in the new tissue.

“Even in healthy oral microbial communities, the species that can cause disease, pathobionts, are usually at low levels. When they increase in numbers, a healthy microbiome can shift to a pathogenic one. Depending on the oral disease, different species proliferate,” Cugini said.

She noted that a peptide Kumar developed previously for a different anti-infection application was able to destroy the germ *P. aeruginosa* by disrupting its membrane, adding, “We are going to look at a panel of oral bacteria to determine if this antimicrobial peptide hydrogel, known as K6, is effective against them. We feel confident it will not disrupt the entire microbiome, because our localized delivery to the canal space and hydrogel properties ensure the peptide remains where we put it.” — Tracey Regan, Senior News and Media Relations Officer at New Jersey Institute of Technology



RSDM Researcher to Embark on New Study on Oral HPV

Assistant Professor of Oral Biology Modupe Coker was awarded a \$4.5 million National Institutes of Health (NIH)/National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research grant for her five-year project titled “HPV, HIV, and Oral Microbiota Interplay in Nigerian Youth.”

“We already know there is a higher risk of oral HPV-positive cancers in adult HIV-infected populations,” said Coker, a dentist and an epidemiologist, a faculty at RSDM with an adjunct position at the Rutgers School of Public Health. “But this phenomenon has not been studied in children or adolescents. This is of particular interest as perinatally-infected children are at lifelong risk of HIV-associated comorbidities which might include oral HPV persistence.”

Coker’s native country, Nigeria, has one of the highest numbers of people living with HIV and is home to the most significant number of children living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.

With the five-year award, she will observe the medical histories of Nigerian children between the ages of nine to 16 by using clinical data and samples. Her team of international researchers will study three groups of adolescents: HIV-infected;

HIV-exposed but uninfected (perinatally through mothers); and neither exposed nor infected. Where possible, mothers will also be included in this research study.

“There’s a lot we don’t know about why HIV might be increasing the risk of oral HPV and having a full picture with a mother involved could prove helpful,” said Coker. The team strives to have a total of 660 mother-child pairs.

Coker’s research on HIV began while doing her MPH at Johns Hopkins School Bloomberg School of Public Health. Thereafter, she worked in the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief program, which provides AIDS care all over the globe and in the US. She specifically worked within a care and treatment program led by the Institute of Human Virology, University of Maryland.

“I learned a lot by being part of this and was a foundation for what I do today,” said Coker. Following that, she enrolled in a PhD program in epidemiology. “With the background of being a dentist and working with HIV intimately, I was encouraged to merge both worlds.”

This led her to research how HIV

impacts the oral microbiome, “as the microbiome, which plays a key role in immune regulation, could either protect against or facilitate the development of disease, including cancer,” she explained.

“We found that HIV directly impacts the microbiome. We already know that HIV infection increases the risk of oral HPV infection,” she said. “The question is, how does this microbiome interplay with HIV and oral HPV acquisition and persistence?”

Her study hopes to find answers by collecting longitudinal data for the next two to three years. Coker’s team of researchers hypothesize that the microbiome could modulate cancer risk. While one person’s microbiome is different than the others, there are ways to alter it to promote health.

“We are hoping that our work will lay a foundation for future advancements in the field,” Coker said. “It will give us opportunities for prevention, for developing new hypotheses regarding what we can do to limit the impact of HIV and oral HPV infection. It could give us some inkling into inflammatory systems involved in pathogenesis. There’s so much we hope to glean from this study.”

RSDM FACULTY RECEIVES NJHF GRANTS

Two research projects by RSDM faculty have been awarded New Jersey Health Foundation (NJHF) grants. With the \$35,000 award, Associate Professor of Oral Biology

Daniel E. Kadouri will continue his work on predatory bacteria *Bdellovibrio bacteriovorus*, which he hopes can be an alternative treatment method when antibiotics fall short. The second project by Associate Professor of Oral Biology **Chinnaswamy Kasinathan** and Assistant Professor of Oral Biology **Kabilan Velliya Gounder** will examine if lactoferrin, a protein found in milk, can deter Alzheimer’s progression.



Connecting the Dots

Research is an endless quest. That’s why it has always fascinated Georgios Kotsakis. The moment he figures out an answer, he feels a new question he needs to creatively tackle pops up.

“It’s a constant process of evolution, understanding, and discovery,” he said. “That’s very gratifying.”

An experienced researcher with over 100 peer-reviewed articles and textbook chapters with over 20,000 citations of his work, Kotsakis has been named the new assistant dean for clinical research and director of research at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM). He is also the school’s newest professor of oral biology. Prior to joining RSDM, Kotsakis was an associate professor of periodontics, and the Roland Meffert Endowed professor in implant dentistry at University of Texas Health San Antonio.

In his new role, Kotsakis will help establish a structure connecting researchers, experiences, and tools to create strong research teams at Rutgers and beyond. He also aims to mentor and groom the new generation of researchers. “All the foundational components for clinical research excellence are present now,” he said. “My vision is for Rutgers is to be the number one clinical and translational research institution in the Northeast and nationally.”

RSDM has state-of-the-art research facilities, experienced scientists working across different branches of oral biology, and strong clinical researchers with a large patient population –pool—all of which drew Kotsakis. “Dean [Cecile] Feldman has built an amazing clinical research infrastructure that’s highly attractive to both federal and industry sponsors,” said Kotsakis. “I always strive to be in places where there’s an upswing, and I feel like the trajectory at Rutgers SDM is impressive. Nothing is stagnant here. People just want to put in more grants and excel.”

Like he will be connecting dots in



the Office of Research for more fruitful projects, his work as a scientist does the same. Kotsakis’s own line of research focuses on periodontal disease and implants, and he does translational research, which essentially takes basic science research all the way up to clinical trials and then to evidence-based guidelines. In the past, “there was such a huge gap in discovery; there were amazing basic science discoveries that never helped any patient because there was no clinician scientist to take them through the proper steps of translation,” he said.

Kotsakis comes to RSDM with several grants, where young faculty can join his efforts. For instance, he’s the principal investigator on a \$2.4 million National Institutes of Health grant exploring the use of antibiotics along with other treatments for gum disease. “Antibiotics are the number one killer above even opioids in the US,” he said, because of their misuse leading to build resistance in the body. This study aims to decrease antibiotic misuse.

His other projects include investigating periimplantitis microbiology and why the disease occurs; examining why some people are affected by periodontitis while others aren’t and if there’s a proclivity due to inflammatory diseases such as cardiovascular diseases or diabetes; and analyzing clinical data to assess periodontal treatment needs by using artificial intelligence and machine learning. Recently, his work found an optimal way to clean and maintain implants.

“That could be used by clinicians across the US, and we can reach over 10 million Americans who have implants right now,” he said. “With research, you can help way more people than you can with your bare hands.”

New RSDM Program Introduces Dentists to Research

Ayushi Gupta had personal reasons to go into dentistry. She grew up witnessing her grandmother’s daily struggle with ill-fitted dentures and her mother’s frequent dentist trips because of poorly mineralized teeth. She wanted to help them.

During dental school, she became attuned to dental issues in her community, too. She learned how India has few dental practitioners in villages and high levels of oral cancer due to tobacco chewing. In her hometown, Punjab, she noticed fluoride-rich waters caused dental discoloration.

“I would tell myself that I needed to work hard and find out more about these issues,” she said. “That is what made me want to go into research.”

Her first introduction happened through RSDM’s Preceptorship Program in Basic/Clinical Research. Established last year, the program offers either a five-and-a-half-month or 11-month research experience to dentists. They can do hands-on research alongside RSDM experts, attend lectures



from across the curriculum, and even partake in manuscripts preparation.

“This [program] rose as a result of interest expressed by many aspiring international dentists to be involved in research,” said Associate Dean for Research and Professor Narayanan Ramasubbu, the program’s director. He noted that research experience can set foreign-trained dentists apart in the admissions process of U.S. programs. “In the first year, we had four students, and one of them succeeded in being admitted to a dental school.”

Gupta is one of those dentists aspiring to launch a career in America. “I wish to be the first woman in my family to study in America.”

At RSDM, she participated in lectures from a variety of departments, learning about radiology to orofacial pain. She completed modules on best practices for conducting research. She put those to practice at Assistant Professor of Oral Biology Kabilan Velliyagounder’s lab. She conducted an experiment related to neem toothpaste and the control of dental caries. She also looked at how iron deficiency anemia impacts teeth.

“The opportunity to have more research exposure and be able to participate in it actively comes with the benefit of gaining more confidence and experience as a dentist,” said Gupta. She also believes dentists have a responsibility to contribute to the public good through research.

Moreover, she also volunteered at the Rutgers Pantry. “I tried to make the most of [my time],” she said. “My professors have been immensely supportive....I could never have imagined coming to the U.S. and getting this kind of exposure that Rutgers has given me.”

While here, she began studying for the boards with the plan of getting her license and applying for a residency at RSDM.

“My end goal is to have my own practice,” she said, “at the same time volunteer my extra time to community service.”

ANIL ARDESHNA RECEIVES 2022 ALIGN RESEARCH AWARD

Associate Professor and Postgraduate Program Director of Orthodontics

Anil Ardeshta received a 2022 Align Research Award given by Align Technology, Inc. He is

one of 10 researchers chosen from across the world, including scholars from China, Italy, and Turkey. With the \$25,000 grant, Ardeshta, in collaboration with Assistant Professor of Oral Biology Kabilan Velliya Gounder, will conduct a clinical study on biofilm development in two Align products: Invisalign aligners and Vivera retainers.



LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

Professor of Diagnostic Sciences **Carmine LoMonaco** (right) received the New Jersey Dental Association’s Theodore V. Symanski Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association’s President **Peter DeSciscio** (left).

PATIENT CARE



Serving our five clinical locations across New Jersey, we focus on the overall well-being of our patients as well as their oral health. We aim to offer them the best holistic care while building lifelong connections.



Newark Resident Goes No Farther for Care

A longtime Newark resident, Adilah Quddus, 68, drove past RSDM countless times. She finally walked in for care in May 2022.

"I was impressed," said Quddus. "I had such a good experience."

Quddus works for a pulmonary doctor part-time. Given her nature, she put patients' and her family's well-being above hers for years. "What I've done all my life is look after other folks and put myself on the back burner," she said. That included her dental care. She occasionally visited her dentist, but when he passed away, she delayed her checkups. She needed extensive care and was referred to RSDM for treatment.

"I want to be comfortable smiling," she said. "It is a struggle financially, but I know the work must be done....I'm glad Newark has a dental school at a somewhat affordable rate for people and the community."

I'm glad Newark has a dental school at a somewhat affordable rate for people and the community."

At RSDM, she first had a dental screening for comprehensive treatment. Then she had a root canal treatment with student doctor Andrew Hanna '23. "I was nervous....I'm really afraid of dentists," said Quddus. The two began talking, and Quddus felt relaxed. "He said I dozed off and did a light snore," she said with a laugh. When she came back for the next treatment, "he still had a pleasant attitude....I'm glad I got him because he really cares."

She was equally impressed with her next student doctor, Frederick Darcy of Class of 2024. "I couldn't believe he understood everything. He said, 'You have a damaged partial denture, and sometimes you can hear it clink,'" she recalled. "That's when I realized, okay, I'm at the right place."

Being in health care, she understands how difficult it is to deliver care. "I'm so impressed with doctors for the simple reason [that] they're dealing with people from all walks of life," she said and added that the same was true for staff. "They know how to diffuse situations here with a smile."

Her interactions with Hanna and Darcy among others made her realize that RSDM students take their work seriously and do it with passion. "I like the fact that they sit down patiently, talk about exactly what they're going to do, and don't waste my time or money," she said. She also liked that the students asked a lot of questions to understand her concerns and had faculty members alongside for consultation. "I know it costs a lot of money for these dental students to go to school for a profession that they're passionate about. To love what you do makes a difference. And I can tell they're not in it for the money but...to make a difference in the community."

As a member of the Newark community, who devotes a lot of her time to volunteering, she was very happy to uncover this side of RSDM. "It made me tell other folks about the school," said Quddus, whose treatment will continue in the postgraduate periodontics clinic.

20 Years of Pain Gone in an Hour and 20 Minutes

A minute of excruciating pain feels like a lifetime. Imagine experiencing bolts of painful attacks for 20 years. This was Alberto Gracia's reality until he came to RSDM's Center for Temporomandibular Disorders and Orofacial Pain.

"It was so so horrible," said Gracia, a 72-year-old pastor from Cuba, through Ana Baldizon, an oral medicine preceptorship at RSDM who became Gracia's translator.

Gracia had trigeminal neuralgia. It's a condition where the trigeminal nerve—responsible for sensation to the face—is contacted by a blood vessel. This creates episodic electric-like shock pain that can be triggered by a light touch, eating, drinking, putting the head down on a pillow, or even breezy weather. Each episode can last from a few seconds to as long as 15 minutes. The debilitating pain, also referred to as tic douloureux or painful grimace, affects daily activities as well as speech. And half the time, trigeminal neuralgia is misdiagnosed, leading patients to unnecessary root canals, extractions, and even sinus surgeries. A correct diagnosis can take 10-12 years unless patients see a pain specialist.

Gracia came to RSDM's Center for Temporomandibular Disorders and Orofacial Pain during one of his painful attacks. As soon as first-year orofacial pain resident Zahra "Sami" Sarabadani saw him, she suspected trigeminal neuralgia (TN). "It's really hard for us to diagnose and differentiate between TN and even a dentin sensitivity," she noted. But Gracia's clinical presentation was an eminent marker for the condition. Sarabadani personally took him for an MRI and pushed for a quick scan, confirming the diagnosis of a vascular contact of the trigeminal nerve.

"It was like two pieces of pipe laying on each other at Home Depot," said Gary Heir '72, the Robert and Susan Carmel Chair in Algesiology and director of the Center for Temporomandibular Disorders



Gary Heir '72 (left), Alberto Gracia, Ana Baldizon, and Zahra "Sami" Sarabadani at RSDM.

and Orofacial Pain at RSDM. During their first interaction, Heir noticed how Gracia looked skinny, tired, and worn out from the pain.

"A happy guy like this comes with tears coming down his face, holding his face, and he couldn't talk to us. He wrote notes in Spanish. That's how bad it was," he said. "The case is probably one of the worst cases of TN we've seen come to the clinic and was one of the best outcomes."

The team first tried medication, but there were side effects, and it couldn't prevent the breakthrough of pain. Gracia required surgery. Heir promptly referred him to Stephen Johnson, a neurosurgeon, and director of facial pain and trigeminal neuralgia at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School. The two have been collaborating on many cases, and for many years Johnson takes all orofacial students to the operating room to observe his surgeries.

"What's special about this case it is that from diagnosis to surgery, Sami followed this patient from start to finish.... This is really unique," said Heir. "There're 15 orofacial pain programs in the U.S., and I think we're the only one where the orofacial

pain students can observe neurosurgery."

Within two weeks, Gracia was in Johnson's operating room.

"Facial pain is something that we don't normally think about as something that can ruin lives," said Johnson and added, "Trigeminal neurology is sometimes called the suicide disease. It's incomprehensively severe pain." Oftentimes, surgery is curative. After an hour-and-20-minute operation, Gracia woke up pain-free.

"Just to see the difference in his disposition, his smile after surgery, it's so reassuring and it's a reminder of why we do what we do," said Johnson. "Because it is life-changing surgery."

It sure was. Since the operation, Gracia has been living without pain. He regained his weight along with happiness. "I'm simply always laughing now," he said. During Father's Day, his grandchildren noticed the change in him and commented on how he seemed younger and livelier.

"Me happy. No more pain," said Gracia without a translator, now headed to Bolivia, his wife's home, for a trip he can finally enjoy. "I thank God for the excellent team here [at Rutgers]."

Feels Like Coming Home

Wayne Reinhardt first walked into RSDM in 2005 and never looked back.

"Over 18 years, I've seen 30 doctors, and every single one has just been wonderful," said the 76-year-old. "I had a friend who asked, 'Why are you going to a dental school? Aren't you afraid?' You know, I've had professional, excellent dental care [here]."

Reinhardt has been a patient in the school's Ryan White Program, which provides comprehensive dental care to persons living with HIV. During the 2021-22 fiscal year, over 500 patients received treatment, and close to 20 percent of those, including Reinhardt, didn't have insurance.

A former hospital corpsman in the U.S. Coast Guard, Reinhardt was diagnosed with HIV in 1995. Although he has health care through Veterans Affairs, he doesn't qualify for dental benefits as it only covers service-connected treatment.

When needing dental work, Reinhardt's case manager at the East Orange VA Medical Center recommended RSDM "because he had heard good things about it." The manager also told him about the Ryan White Program.

"I really am appreciative of the Ryan White Program. If I didn't have it, I wouldn't have had any dental work because as you know, dental work is very expensive," said Reinhardt, who makes less than \$23,000 a year. "I really thank the Ryan White Program and the people that manage it."



"Over 18 years, I've seen 30 doctors, and **every single one has just been wonderful.**"

Through the program, he received partial dentures, extractions, root canals, and more. "When I got my first dentures, all that I can say was 'Oh, gee, I can actually open my mouth,'" he recalled and added: "My dear mom had complete dentures, but she used to always talk with her hand up [in front of her mouth]. I never had to do that. It was such an enlightening moment, being able to look in the mirror and see a full set of teeth."

His ability to chew and digest improved significantly. He has been able to maintain

a healthy weight, too. "I can eat everything," he said.

While his oral health improved, Reinhardt began to develop other health problems. He had cancer and several heart attacks. In 2008, he had a triple bypass.

"After the surgery, I fell into a real depression," he said. He was diagnosed with moderate bipolar disorder. "The dental work, the kindness, the caring, the pleasantness that I saw here at Rutgers Dental School really helped elevate my mood," he said. "It felt good. It felt like coming home here."

The dental work boosted his confidence as well. "I didn't always feel good about myself, the way I looked with my teeth and whatnot," he said. "Now, I'm over the moon happy with the way they've redone my teeth. And that really helped with the depression."

Recognized

With the Jewish Federation of Metro West, RSDM celebrated students partaking in the Holocaust Survivors Program and awarded them with certificates for their service.





Professor of Restorative Dentistry Peter L. DeSciscio '85 (left), Yelena Olshansky, and Ivan Alkhwekhi '23.

Originally from Syria, Alkhwekhi personally and religiously feels connected to the program and the survivors. “In a way, I also survived a big war when I came here by myself,” he said. “So, Ms. Olshansky and I share a lot in common—we both fled our countries, we both escaped war.”

When the war began, Olshansky was a 13-year-old. She still vividly remembers the freezing nights in the basement of the St. Petersburg art museum, where her father worked. With teary eyes, she recalls cleaning dead bodies off of the streets, delivering letters from wounded soldiers to their families, and sharing a few spoons of food with her family for years.

“My mother couldn’t walk anymore from hunger,” she said. “It was absolutely horrible situation.” In this period, she lost 13 family members—six from hunger and seven from combat.

After the war, her mother got better, her father went back to his museum job, and she studied music. But the family saw another tragedy. “One person wrote a letter that my father stole two Russian pictures and sold them to the United States,” she said. “They gave him 15 years.” Olshansky’s mother was also sentenced as an accomplice. Olshansky herself was interrogated.

“After this, I changed my mind about my country,” she said. She first got a visa to Israel and then came to the U.S. in 1979.

She began learning English and studied bouquet making. Not finding employment in that field, she started working in Lord and Taylor’s billing department. Retired in 2013, she lives in an adult daycare in New Brunswick. She acts, reads, and gives lectures about the Holocaust and Jewish people so that history wouldn’t repeat itself.

94-Year-Old Holocaust Survivor Gets Her Smile Back

War, death, hunger—Yelena Olshansky, 94, has seen it all. She survived one of the most brutal periods of world history: World War II and the Holocaust. She is now a patient in RSDM’s Holocaust Survivors Program (HSP).

“When they said to me that this is free, I couldn’t believe my ears,” said Olshansky, originally from St. Petersburg, Russia.

HSP took root in 2020 thanks to the generosity of Howard Drew ’82, whose parents were Holocaust survivors, and his wife, Ina Drew. So far, the program has had more than 60 patients and over 359 patient visits.

Olshansky has had most of her teeth pulled out by her previous dentists. This left her with severe discomfort. She lost her appetite and a lot of weight. “I suffered for almost a year,” she said. She went from one doctor to the next for a solution. “One doctor said I have a crooked mouth and therefore should not do anything.” Then, she heard about RSDM’s program, where she found the care she needed.

“They made a miracle for me,” she said. Olshansky has had fillings, cleanings, and dentures, and she might need implants in the future. “I have the best doctors in the world,” she said. “All the doctors are so polite, so human, so nice to me ...

Everybody pays attention to me, and I even feel at ease.” She added that she feels like a queen at RSDM.

“She was an actress. She wanted to be able to smile, and she really felt somewhat handicapped because she was told a bunch of times that her smile was crooked, and no one wanted to fix it,” said Professor of Restorative Dentistry Peter L. DeSciscio ’85, the attending in Olshansky’s case. “We immediately built a rapport and trust with her, and she felt like she was in the right place and being treated by the right people.”

DeSciscio has been involved with the program ever since he heard about it. “These types of programs really connect us not just to one person, but to the entire community,” he said. But he feels he has a special connection with Olshansky. “She looks at us like her children.”

The same is felt by Ivan Alkhwekhi ’23, a student in the internationally educated DMD program. “She looks at me like she’s looking at one of her sons,” said Alkhwekhi.

Committed to Care

Terrance Johansen, 65, treats his body like a temple. He sleeps early, exercises regularly, and doesn’t drink or smoke. He also tries to pay close attention to his smile. But as a Medicare beneficiary, he lacks dental coverage. When he needed care, RSDM’s Ryan White Oral Health Services Program came to his rescue.

The Ryan White Program provides comprehensive dental care to persons living with HIV in New Jersey through federal and state grants. Last fiscal year alone, over 500 patients were treated in Newark and the Community-Oriented Dental Education sites in South Jersey. And close to 20 percent of these patients didn’t have any insurance.

“We’re one of the biggest providers of oral health care for the HIV population in the entire state of New Jersey,” said the Program Director and Associate Professor of Diagnostic Sciences Steven Toth ’07.

Toth explained that having HIV puts one at risk of becoming trapped in a vicious cycle of oral health problems. For instance, a side effect of some medications that HIV patients often take is dry mouth, which increases the risk for dental decay that can then lead to an abscess, and in turn, can lead to a serious systemic infection. “You have to break that cycle,” he said by getting regular dental check-ups and comprehensive care. Because of that, while treating a dental problem, RSDM providers seek to address its cause to improve patients’ oral health.

An RSDM patient for five years,



Johansen learned about the program from a community health organization. He was diagnosed with HIV in 2006. “My life changed, totally. Totally,” he recounted. Currently retired, he was a nurse—a job he gave up after his diagnosis—and was also in the catering business for many years. “And some things have been very difficult, but I feel great now. I truly do.”

A part of that feeling stems from his ability to take care of his teeth. So far, he had cleanings, fillings, and extractions at RSDM. He can now chew his food instead of tearing it, which is a “big difference,” he said. RSDM recognizes the vital connection between oral health and nutrition.

Johansen recently had prosthetic surgery to be fitted for a denture. He will soon have his partial dentures and might be getting implants later on.

“I’m so happy I came here,” Johansen said. “I really have an affinity for Rutgers. They’ve been great to me. They really have. And I just can’t say thank you enough.”

RSDM’S COMMUNITY CLINICS Continue to Grow with \$2 Million Federal Funding

When it comes to dental care for HIV/AIDS populations, RSDM is a leading institution. It’s one of 12 Community-Based Dental Partnership Programs spread across the U.S. and supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration’s Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program. Recently, the agency renewed its commitment to Rutgers with a \$2 million funding for the next five years.

“RSDM continues to increase health equity, stop HIV stigma, and reduce health disparities by caring for the whole person and addressing their social determinants of health,” said Jill A. York, assistant dean for the extramural clinics located in Galloway, Northfield, and Somerdale that annually receive around 500 patients.

Over the years, the program has evolved to support patients beyond oral health. For instance, if one is having difficulty with housing or food, RSDM clinicians work with case managers to seek solutions. This new funding will enable York and her team to expand their offerings.

Starting in September, Rutgers School of Nursing students will join the RSDM clinics for a new pilot program creating wellness passports and providing preventive care, focusing on hypertension, diabetes, cholesterol, and cancer screenings. In addition to this grant, RSDM clinics have been chosen for AIDS Education Training Center’s Practice Transformation Program through which mental and behavioral health will be weaved into the clinics. “That’s something that’s unique,” said York. “We’ve always been employing a holistic approach to patient care, but with grants and collaborations like these, we’ve been taking our program to new heights.”



SHARING TIPS

At the Por Tu Salud Health Fair in Paterson, RSDM students Rebekah Webster ’25 (left), Shemar Rhoden ’26, Dilyetna Gebru ’26, and Precious Nwaba ’25 shared tips on oral health care and dental hygiene with approximately 60 residents, all of whom are underserved.



ON A MISSION

In April, 6 third-year dental students participated in an outreach program led by Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion Herminio Perez in collaboration with World of Smiles Inc. and Fundación MIR schools of La Romana, Dominican Republic. In four days, they treated more than 120 patients of all ages, performing everything from fillings to root canals to extractions.



Our students, faculty, and staff share their expertise with the community in various ways. Through mission trips, complimentary screenings, fundraising events, educational programs, they make care accessible to those who otherwise might not receive the medical attention they need.



Faculty Prints 3D Teeth in Rural Dominican Republic

Aligners, dentures, retainers—3D printing has been a game changer in dentistry. Rutgers dentists brought this revolutionary technology to rural Dominican Republic, where they transformed the islanders' smiles.

"There are kids [there] that will lose a front tooth and go their whole lives without a replacement," explained Mauricio Lavie '03'06, adjunct assistant professor of restorative dentistry. Lavie printed 68 prostheses for all ages in four and a half days. Normally, a single prosthesis takes two weeks. But from initial scanning to finishing touches, Lavie singlehandedly produced these prostheses in tough conditions, like running the 3D printer on a generator and grinding dentures on the street with his backup battery supply. "Even though this deviates from normal office in every capacity—temperature, people, materials—you adapt," he said. "You make it work."

Lavie went to the Dominican Republic with Cheerful Heart Dental Mission, which took root with efforts of Clinical Associate Professor of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Pamela Alberto '80 and John Cornwell, founder of Cheerful Heart Mission. The dental mission



just turned 10, providing dental care to thousands of patients annually. For locals, that's oftentimes their only dentist visit.

The pop-up dental clinic is set up in an empty chamber in a church in Loma de Cabrera, a border village in the northwest of the Dominican Republic. The space has no running water and unstable power. Yet, in a day's work, volunteers turn it into a bustling clinic with portable dental chairs, lights, Alberto's X-ray unit, and this year, Lavie's 3D printer sponsored by SprintRay. The clinic has a sterilization station where tools get bleached in blue bowls and an equipment repair desk run by Alberto's engineer husband.

When Alberto first went to the island, toothbrushes were considered luxury items. "The kids had no clothes, no shoes, swollen bellies, no food, no water," she said. "It was horrible. It still brings tears to my eyes." Each volunteer checks in a 50-pound supply box enroute to the island, bringing dental supplies, including toothbrushes and toothpaste as well as flip-flops and clothes.

In a decade of service, there has been a "tremendous difference" in the community, Alberto observed. The trip has also been transforming students. "It helps them to understand the needs of the world," said Alberto. "[They] become better doctors because they get to see a lot more patients than in dental school."

Gabriela Vegas, a pediatric resident from Venezuela, can attest. "We worked really hard, and by the third day, my arm was hurting," she said. But those 12-hour days made her realize how much she loves dentistry and helping those in need.

There are also longtime mission volunteers like Janet Tracy, registered nurse and professor emerita at William Paterson University. Tracy was instrumental in establishing a patient recording system. She also helped expand screenings with blood pressure and glucose tests. "We've learned how to better support people in the community besides dental needs."

She hopes to go back as long as she can. "We've begun to feel like family, and it feels like going back home."



Undergraduate Student Gets a Taste of Dentistry at RSDM

Tiffany-Chrissy Mbeng had her mind set on becoming a political scientist. But her sister's illness stirred her career plans toward dentistry—a field she knew through her dentist mother.

“My sister had something called trigeminal neuralgia,” Mbeng said, which is an electrical shock-like acute sensation on one side of the face, affecting the trigeminal nerve. Her sister's pain began after a dental procedure. But making that connection took a lengthy process, involving many prescriptions and tests. Then, a general dentist pinpointed the problem.

“I saw my sister go from screaming at night to sleeping in peace overnight just because of one procedure,” she said. “I was inspired that somebody could do that, so that started my passion for dentistry.”

Ignited with passion, she shadowed her sister's dentist for hours and changed

her path to the pre dental track at George Washington University in Washington D.C. To get another step closer to her dream career, she attended Rutgers' Summer Health Professions Education Program (SHPEP).

SHPEP is a six-week innovative enrichment program to prepare the next generation of interprofessional leaders. Besides RSDM, the program includes Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, School of Nursing, and Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy.

“It was really the interprofessional aspect of the program that intrigued me,” said Mbeng, a junior majoring in biology and minoring in communications. “This was [also] my first time doing anything related to dentistry in the school setting.”

At RSDM, she got hands-on experience, such as making dental impressions. She attended lectures by faculty, broadening her horizons on dentistry and its applications as well. For instance, a presentation by Harry Zohn, professor of periodontics, introduced her to forensic dentistry.

“If I didn't have the exposure at Rutgers, I'd have never known about that field, which really intrigued me,” she said. She shot her debut vlog to document her experiences with the hope that it could inspire other students to participate in the program. “It helped me confirm that dentistry is my passion and that this is what I want to do.”

In addition to being a passion, becoming a dentist is also a mission for Mbeng.

She aspires to go into dentistry to care and be a role model for Black women. “We make up only about three percent of dentists,” said Mbeng, cofounder and copresident of George Washington University's Black Girl Pre-Health Collective.

Mbeng grew up at the intersection of diverse cultures. Her parents are from Cameroon, but she was born in the United Kingdom and raised in Canada and Brazil. “I really feel at home in Rutgers,” she said. “It is one of the most diverse schools I've ever been to.”



INTRO TO DENTISTRY

At Impressions Day, hosted by Student National Dental Association, 45 pre-dental students learned about the application process and gained insights into dental school through meeting RSDM students. Keynote speaker Tony Cruz of Class of 2012 talked about transition from school to practice and shared his experience that led him to become a successful practice owner.

A TRANSATLANTIC PARTNERSHIP

RSDM and the University of Medicine, Tirana, Albania, signed a memorandum of understanding in 2020 to promote global scholarly collaborations as well as faculty and student exchanges between the two schools. In September, RSDM welcomed Renato Isufi, an oral surgeon and a faculty member at the University of Medicine, Tirana, and Tedi Verçani, a recent graduate of the University of Medicine, Tirana, for two-weeks.



Give Kids a Smile Day Returns

After a two-year pandemic hiatus, Give Kids a Smile Day resumed at RSDM on February 3. Approximately 100 children from four Irvington Public Schools received a free dental screening at the pediatric dentistry clinic.

Give Kids a Smile is a nationwide effort sponsored by the American Dental Association Foundation with the goal of providing free oral health care to underserved children. At the RSDM event, about 50 students, faculty, and staff partook in the event. Some of them delivered screenings while others shared tips on brushing and flossing. Student volunteers held dental activities. Venus Panek, dental assistant at the Pediatric Dentistry Department, dressed up as the tooth fairy, delivering magic and cheer to kids at the treatment bays. A magician kept the kids entertained while waiting for their turn. Volunteers from the Horizon Foundation

for New Jersey, and their mascot, also introduced children to healthy habits.

“It was a great day,” said Glenn Rosivack, chair of the Pediatric Dentistry Department “The children get to experience a fun day at the dentist. For some of them, it is their first experience at the dentist, and we strive to make it a pleasant experience which hopefully shapes their view of dentistry for the future.”

One of those children was Jaden of Augusta Pre-School Academy, who was accompanied by his mother, Jasmine Richardson. “I wanted him to just get his teeth checked out and be here because I wasn't able to go the last time,” said Richardson. “I just think this is really nice that Rutgers offers this for free.”



RSDM Wins Annual Charity Hockey Game

Every spring, RSDM and New Jersey Medical School (NJMS) play hockey to support a charity organization. At this year's event, RSDM won 6 to 5.

“It was a close game,” said Frank Cundiff, a member of the Class of 2025, who organized the event along with John Gattuso '23 and Eric Smith '23.

The first charity game between RSDM and NJMS was held in 2013. Since then, the games raised close to \$85,000 in support of various causes. This year, RSDM and NJMS supported The Valerie Fund, which provides individualized care to children at medical centers close to their homes. The teams, made up of students, faculty, alumni, and friends of the school, raised over \$4,000. The game also featured a teddy bear toss, a new addition by Cundiff, whose college hockey team would collect toys for kids and engage their fans every December. The RSDM and NJMS teams collected over 200 teddy bears that were donated to George Washington Carver Elementary School in Newark.





With their commitment to dentistry and high ethical standards, our faculty impresses students, colleagues, and patients. Their infectious passion transmits to the next generation of RSDM dentists.



Hirschberg Named President of American Association of Endodontists

Craig S. Hirschberg, chair of the Department of Endodontics at RSDM, has been elected as the president of American Association of Endodontists (AAE), which represents specialty endodontics in North America.

“Getting involved in organized dentistry, whether it’s on a local, state, national, or even international level is a worthwhile pursuit,” said Hirschberg. “It’s really great to have colleagues that you can collaborate with all over the country and the world.”

Hirschberg received his DDS from New York University and his certificate in endodontics from RSDM, then called New Jersey Dental School, in 1983. “What I love most about endodontics is [that] it’s very diagnosis intensive, and there can be some real mysteries when it comes to diagnosing patients’ pain,” he said. “I love these diagnostic puzzles.”

He joined AAE when he started his endodontic training in 1981. But it wasn’t until the mid-2000s that he became active in organized dentistry; his mentor and then-chair of RSDM’s Endodontics Department, Gary Hartwell, got Hirschberg involved in committees and educator workshops. In 2012, he got nominated to AAE’s Board of Directors as District II Director, which encompasses Connecticut, New Jersey, and New York. “That’s when things really sort of snowballed,” Hirschberg said. He was nominated as a trustee of the Foundation for Endodontics. He was nominated to AAE’s Executive Committee as AAE’s secretary, and then received the nomination as vice president, putting him in line to become the AAE president.

While most of AAE’s projects are set into motion years before any president reaches office, Hirschberg, in his new role, plans to appoint a special committee between

AAE and its European counterpart, the European Society of Endodontology (ESE). His goal is to update the diagnostic terminology used internationally in clinical settings, research, academic institutions, journals, and textbooks. Most endodontic research is published by AAE’s Journal of Endodontics and ESE’s International Endodontics Journal. “It really makes sense for the quality of research that we’re speaking the same diagnostic language,” he said. He is on the Scientific Advisory Board of the Journal of Endodontics.

Besides the AAE, Hirschberg is a Diplomate of the American Board of Endodontics. He was the 2013 American Dental Education Association (ADEA)/AAE Foundation Scholar in the ADEA Leadership Institute. He serves on ADEA’s Legislative Advisory Committee and the American Dental Association’s Dental Admissions Testing Committee. He is a fellow of the International College of Dentists as well as the American College of Dentists.

Hirschberg’s teaching career at RSDM started in 2001. Initially, he taught one day a week, but he gradually increased his commitment, becoming a full-time faculty in 2009. He has been the chair of the Department of Endodontics since 2013.

“A message I have for our grads is that if they could find a way of teaching, even half a day per week, they are doing a real service to the dental profession,” he said. “The satisfaction of teaching is its own reward. I would encourage people to teach, get involved, and be a mentor.”

REMEMBERING BALBO: The Eponym for Balbo Day

At RSDM, the name Michael Balbo is all too familiar. Every year, the school hosts the signature event, Dr. Michael P. Balbo Research Day, where pre and postdoctoral candidates present their research projects to the community.

But who was Balbo? That's a much less known story.

Michael Palladino Balbo was born in 1929 in Astoria, Queens. He received his DDS from Georgetown University in 1955. He briefly served in the military during the Korean War. Following that, he opened a dental practice in Astoria that he ran for almost two decades.

He joined RSDM, then the College of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, as an illustrator for operative manuals used in clinical dental services. He also started teaching in the Operative Dentistry Department.

Clinical Professor in Restorative Dentistry Daniel Chertoff '61 was in operative dentistry with Balbo. "It was a thrill to work with him. It really was," said Chertoff. Balbo was a polite, soft-spoken gentleman. "He was the nicest guy you'd talk to. Very artistic. A wonderful dentist. He was the whole package." Balbo did illustrations, oil paintings, sculptures, and more.

Balbo later became the course director for operative dentistry—one of the hardest courses in the curriculum. He began to take on administrative roles too. He started as director of academic resources and rose all the way to special assistant to the dean for student support services.

One of his students, Professor of Restorative Dentistry Peter DeSciscio '85, still recalls how supportive Balbo was to his

students. "He was always someone who would listen, calm you down, and make you feel good that there was light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

"I just feel it was easier getting through school with him." Balbo was a regular at student events as well.

Another student of his was now-Vice Dean Kim Fenesy '86. Balbo recruited Fenesy, a fellow medical illustrator, as a first-year student. "He was the best artist I've seen when it came to doing illustrations on that level," said Fenesy.

Besides illustrations, Balbo and Fenesy worked on a multitude of projects. They put together the clinical dentistry course, which introduced first- and second-year students to the clinic. She helped Balbo with the summer research program that partnered students with researchers.

"He really was forward-thinking," said

Fenesy. He wanted students to understand research as well as clinical practice and didactics. He wanted to create a platform for students to present their research and created the Dental Expo, today's Balbo Day. In the 90s, Balbo and Fenesy launched the Foresight Program for second-years to mentor the incoming class.

As Balbo's health declined, Fenesy slowly started to take on his responsibilities. Balbo

succumbed to cancer on August 16, 1996, in Monmouth Beach, NJ, where he lived for 30 years. He was 67. The expo was renamed after him in his memory.

During his life, his commitment to the school, students, and dentistry didn't go unnoticed. The American Dental Association recognized him for the Dental Expo. Internally, he received the Exceptional Merit Award, Excellence in Teaching Award, and three RSDM classes dedicated their yearbooks to Balbo.



Inset: Michael P. Balbo

Above: Daniel Chertoff holding a T-shirt designed by Balbo for a fundraising walkathon for the school in the 70s.

Below: In addition to drawing medical illustrations, Balbo often sketched in his daily life.

Professor of Periodontics Howard Drew '82 in one of those classes. He was first Balbo's and then colleague. Said Drew, "He was a great teacher, but more importantly, he was a great human being. You couldn't help but love and respect him."

In the clinic, Balbo would make quick sketches to explain a concept or give feedback to students. Drew remembers how Balbo saw students as colleagues from day one and treated them with respect. "He was preaching about diversity and inclusion 40 years ago, when nobody heard about it. But that's the type of individual he was," said Drew. "He, to me, epitomized what a dental faculty person should be. He was the best."

On the 2023 Balbo Day, students presented 38 posters. **Zhi Chao Feng '23** won first place among predoctoral students, and **Hemamalini Chandrashekhar**, an orofacial pain resident, came first among the postgraduates.

Fatahzadeh Honored by New Jersey State Governor's Jefferson Award

Professor of Diagnostic Sciences Mahnaz Fatahzadeh was selected as one of the 2022 New Jersey State Governor's Jefferson Awards honorees in the health care service category.

"I feel truly humbled and am grateful for this recognition," said Fatahzadeh, who was honored for raising public awareness about oral cancer and its risk factors as well as educating medical professionals about early signs of this malignancy and the impact of timely detection on its prognosis.

Fatahzadeh advocates for improved health outcomes for oral cancer through community outreach, education, training of non-dental health professionals, HPV vaccination in the dental setting, and opportunistic screening as part of primary care.

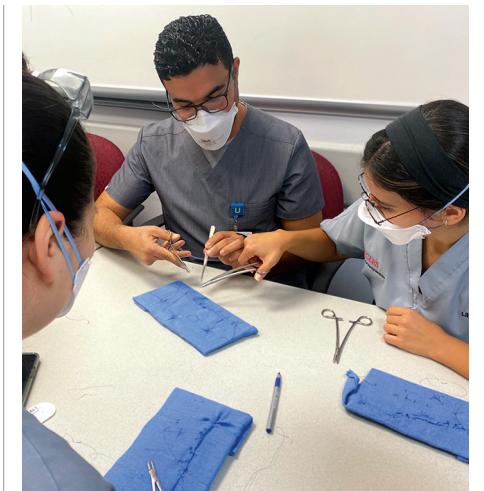
"Advanced oral cancer could prove fatal, and its survivors often suffer significant

therapeutic complications," noted Fatahzadeh. "Improving oral cancer survival requires engagement on multiple fronts such as education directed at prevention, screening for early detection, and health policy development for access and equity."

To that end, she been organizing walks, holding screening events, conducting research, and sharing her expertise through articles, seminars, and interviews.

At RSDM, Fatahzadeh was the director of school's annual oral cancer screening event, offered by faculty and students, for high-risk underserved community residents. Additionally, she has served as a member of the NJ Oral/Oropharyngeal Cancer Work Group, the chair of the NY/NJ Oral Cancer Consortium, and a member of the Oral Cancer Task Force of the American Academy of Oral Medicine. Through these roles, she has helped shape overarching public health policies to reduce the burden as well as the associated morbidity and mortality of oral cancer throughout the state of New Jersey.

"I realize there is much work left to be done," Fatahzadeh said, "and I hope to do my share and motivate others to join me."

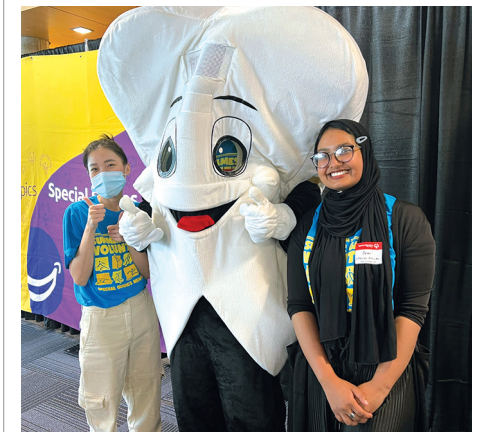


PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Assistant Professor of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery **Mostafa Alwakeel** held a suturing workshop during the third-years' oral surgery rotations.

HEALTHY ATHLETES

RSDM faculty and students attended Special Olympics New Jersey's Healthy Athletes event as part of its 2023 Summer Games. Through the organization's Special Smiles program, they provided oral screenings to athletes.





Alumna and Restorative Dentistry's New Vice Chair Yousef Sets Herself and Department High Goals

Associate Professor of Restorative Dentistry Hoda Yousef has been selected as the new vice chair of the school's largest department. She is an RSDM alumna and has been a full-time faculty member since 1998.

"I feel like this is my second home," she said. "I've seen it grow and I've seen it change and I've seen it change for the better; I'm proud to be a part of this."

Prior to this role, Yousef was the past president of the New Jersey section of American College of Prosthodontists, the chairman of faculty affairs, and president of the academic assembly. As the vice chair, she hopes to help introduce new programs and courses, improve the department's existing curriculum, and ensure that students graduate with the fulfillment that they got the best education like she herself felt.

At RSDM, students are introduced to various specialties and perform numerous procedures. "The number of requirements

for our students outweighs other universities," she said. "Students graduate extracting more teeth, doing more dentures or removable prostheses than any other school. ... We are one of the few schools that allow clinical treatment of implant patients on which our implant competencies are completed."

Now an enthusiastic prosthodontist and educator, Yousef stumbled upon the profession.

For as long as she can remember, she wanted to be a health care provider. First, she thought of medicine but decided it wasn't the right fit after a year of medical school in her motherland, Egypt. As she explored her options, she learned one of her Rutgers classmates was entering dental school.

"I said, dentistry? At that time, I was almost 21 and I had never been to a dentist because I had good teeth," she said. So, her first dentist visit became to learn more about the job. "It seemed like such a nice profession, and I would be helping people in a different aspect. So, I went into dentistry blindly."

But once she started, she began loving it. A born perfectionist, she immediately connected with prosthodontics, where perfection is an immanent property of the specialty. She finished her DMD in 1991 and completed her prosthodontics specialty along with a master's in oral biology a few years later. Following the program, she first was a part-time faculty member and then became full-time in 1998 when her mentor and idol Dr. William Nicholas was preparing to retire.

"When they asked me to take over his course, it was like getting the Nobel Prize," said Yousef, who is one of the few board-certified prosthodontists at RSDM. "He was a general dentist and taught prosthodontics in the Restorative Department to the caliber of the best prosthodontists." Nicholas's courses had piqued Yousef's interest in the discipline, which she says, "has been my calling."

For Pride Month, Herminio Perez Reflects on Diversity and Inclusion at RSDM

*Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Diversity and Inclusion, **Herminio Perez '04** holds several leadership roles in diversity and inclusion at national and local levels. He's a member of the American Dental Association Board of Trustees' Diversity and Inclusion Committee; a counselor for American Dental Education Association (ADEA) Pride; and a member of the RBHS Diversity Leadership Council. For Pride Month, Perez reflected on how diversity and inclusion efforts are taking place at RSDM.*

How does all your diversity and inclusion work feed into your role at RSDM?

It provides me with different ideas and strategies that I can use to develop programs here. It also makes me realize all the things that we're doing but aren't necessarily happening in other schools, things that are unique to our school.

Can you give examples of those unique initiatives?

For example, we established gender-neutral bathrooms in different areas of the school. Another example is with Clinical Affairs we recently changed the new patient registration form to be more inclusive. Now, the document includes not only demographics but also transgender history, sexual orientation, and pronouns. Many years ago, we also started this program called Creating Awareness in Academic Dentistry to plant the seed in underrepresented and also LGBTQ students to pursue careers in dental academia. Those are things I don't see in other dental schools. Additionally, in 2021, we launched the "Building Bridges



for Impact and Growth" program to develop diversity champions across RBHS; we've been leading that program and collaborating with other RBHS schools.

You also do groundbreaking work on the national level. Tell us about your involvement in ADEA Pride.

Our mission is to educate the dental community about the needs of the LGBTQ community. That's why we started creating the first set of webinars called "Out and Safe" to create awareness about the LGBTQ faculty, students, staff, and patients. My role provides an opportunity for RSDM to be represented and be part of all those initiatives. We're not only educating other dental schools, but also our own school.

What's in the works for the future?

Next, we'll be creating another set of webinars, "Beyond Safe." It'll provide tools and strategies to create and implement initiatives supporting an inclusive environment for the LGBTQ community. We want to continue to make dental schools more inclusive communities and drive change.



STAFF

RSDM employees are a dedicated bunch. Day in day out, they ensure the school runs smoothly with its large educational and clinical arms.



Jill Paul on Duty

*RSDM has a large clinical operation with a substantial sterilization need. Every day, thousands of instruments make their way up and down between our sterilization unit to the clinics. **Jill Paul**, the infection control program coordinator at RSDM, oversees this process, ensuring that everything is reprocessed correctly and in a timely manner.*

How does the sterilization process work at RSDM?

It is a huge facility down there! The department is divided into two separate areas: the contaminated side and the clean side, also known as the prep and pack/sterilization side. The washers and a cart washer divide the two areas. The instruments and closed-case carts go into the washers on the contaminated side and come out on the clean side.



How do the tools get to sterilization?

Each clinic has a metal closed-case cart in the dirty dispensary. Contaminated items are put into that cart in the clinics to be brought down to the intake drop-off downstairs for reprocessing.

What happens after you receive them?

Once the cart is received, it is emptied, and the items are processed through the washers. The washer cycle takes about half an hour and once completed the items are now ready for prep and pack. There are six prep and pack stations, where individuals work getting everything ready to be loaded into the sterilizers. The sterilization cycle takes about 50 minutes. The turnaround time from the dirty dispensary through sterilization and back to the clean dispensary is about 4 hours. —Nansy Hanna '24



PRESENT

Assistant Professor of Restorative Dentistry and Director of the New Brunswick Faculty Practice **Uchenna Akosa** (right) and her team represented RSDM at RutgersDay.

Father to Daughter

Monica Williams-Riley is the senior management assistant at the Office of Chief Operating Officer, who followed in her father's footsteps to RSDM.

For how long have you been here, and why did you decide to come to RSDM?

I was born here in Newark and moved to Irvington at age of 6. I went to Irvington public school system. My first job was actually working at Macy's. I also worked as a manager for the cosmetic department at Sears for 5-6 years. I was always on the look for advancement in my career.

My father was one of the police captains here which was known as CMDNJ, the College of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, at the time. I got to see the behind-the-scenes with my father. It is amazing to see how much the campus has changed over all these years! Through his connections, I was introduced and that is how I was hired here. I have been here for 20 years!

What do you enjoy doing outside the school?

I am a licensed minister. I teach, preach, and do intercessory prayer groups outside of school. I am a wife. I have 2 daughters. Family time is super important for me. I love spending time with my family, planning trips to the beach and just



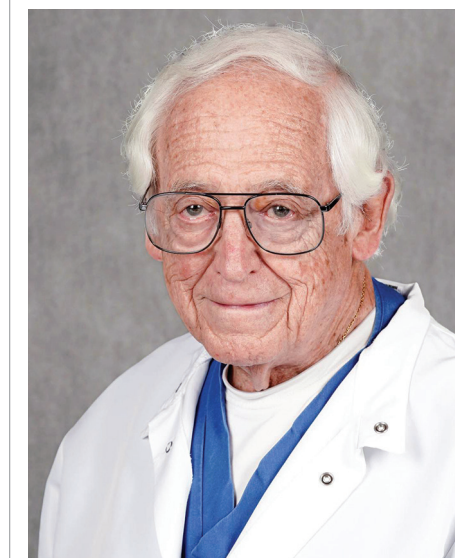
spending time by the water. I also love to travel. I like going to the shore and amusement parks.

What do you like the most about RSDM?

The people! I made a lot of connections here. It is the people that keep you going, the relationships you build here. We are all always together, help each other out, and work as a team.

The relationships I made here over the last couple of years were amazing, and I made a lot of "work moms" and "work sisters." I made connections ranging from the mailroom to housekeeping, you name it! I am blessed and privileged to have these connections and bonds throughout campus! —Nansy Hanna '24

Employee Milestones Recognized at Annual Dinner



RSDM continued its annual tradition of celebrating its employees and recognizing those who have achieved a milestone in their careers. At the June 6 event in Nanina's in the Park, colleagues and employees came together for a night of celebration. Faculty and staff with over 25 years of service received their awards from Dean Cecile A. Feldman.

This year, Clinical Professor of Restorative Dentistry Daniel J. Chertoff celebrated his 60 years at RSDM and his

upcoming retirement. Chertoff, a member of the Class of 1961, joined the school as a part-time faculty in 1963 while running his private practice. He has been a dedicated teacher and a supportive colleague throughout the years. "This school gave me the opportunity to follow my dreams," he said. "It gave me the opportunity to brush shoulders with some of the finest clinicians and practitioners. It gave me the opportunity to help teach and train two generations of dentists. With this, I am so grateful and appreciative."

TWO RSDM STAFF RECEIVE RBHS CHANCELLOR AWARDS

Chief Financial Officer **Vincent Nacco** and Dental Assistant **Cynthia Washington** were chosen for the 2022 Third Annual Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences (RBHS) Chancellor Awards. Established by the RBHS Chancellor's Office, these awards acknowledge the extraordinary work of faculty and staff. Nacco received the Leadership Award and Washington was selected as one of the Sustained Service Award recipients.



ALUMNI



Out in the world, RSDM alumni get recognized for their talent, professionalism, and leadership. They are role models for those following in their footsteps and their fellow dentists.



RSDM Alumna Shapes Policy

As an undergraduate student, Chelsea Fosse '17 worked as a newborn hearing screener. She knew hearing issues were a common birth defect, but how did this screening come to be? A thorough Google search pointed to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).

"I said to myself: that's what I want to do. I want to influence policy that has implications for families and for health and wellness," said Fosse, then a biology major interested in health care. "I'm going to go work at the AAP."

With her mind set, she joined the AAP's Children with Special Needs Division. Her first assignment was assisting with a statement on the importance of oral health for children with special needs. "All of a sudden, I thought, oral health, dentistry? This is kind of cool. And it just got the wheels spinning," she recalled. "Then everywhere I turned, I was seeing something that related to dentistry, and I thought, 'This is a sign.'"

She followed the signs, became a dentist, and was recently named the director of the Pediatric Oral Health Research and Policy Center, American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD). In this new role, she is ready to tackle major issues and help bring about change that will benefit children and families.

"Some really great work has been going on here [at the center], and I'm excited to be a part of it going forward," she said. Fosse has a lot on her agenda. "Early childhood caries is one of the most significant and severe issues in pediatric dentistry," she noted. To her, prevention starts by supporting maternal health and providing education on early childhood dental care. She will also continue work on Medicaid policy to make sure kids can have continuous access to preventative and comprehensive care. "We know that children who have the highest rates of untreated caries are typically from lower income families," she said.

Moreover, she wants to better prepare all dentists to treat patients with disabilities. "Pediatric dentists, for years, have really been stepping up to the plate to continue caring for patients with special needs through the lifespan," she said. "We have a really great opportunity to work with organizations like the Special Care Dentistry Association and the American Academy of Developmental Medicine and Dentistry to figure out how we better prepare general dentists to treat this population."

Fosse knew she wanted to work with people with disabilities but didn't know special care dentistry existed. In her first year at RSDM, she met Evan Spivack, director of RSDM's Delta Dental of New Jersey Special Care Treatment Center, at a talk.

"Rutgers, at the time, was really unique in that not many schools had a dedicated special care clinic," Fosse noted. "I just got lucky that I found myself in the right spot."

Fosse approached Spivack and asked to get involved in the clinic. "They knew I was passionate about learning from them, and they made a space for me," said Fosse, who shadowed them outside of classes. "I'll be forever grateful for that."

She also became one of the first fellows of RSDM's Special Populations Interprofessional Care Experiences program and graduated with Special Needs Distinction.

"I'm just really grateful," she said, "that Rutgers gave me all the opportunities it did."



Rabie Shanti Returns to RSDM to Shape Cancer Care and Pay it Forward

Associate Professor of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Rabie Shanti is no stranger to Rutgers. After finishing his DMD at Harvard, he came to Rutgers New Jersey Medical School for his MD and later became a resident at RSDM’s oral and maxillofacial program.

“When I came to interview for residency, I was just blown away by the program,” said Shanti, because of its intensive clinical experience and rigorous curriculum. “It’s hard to describe how much Dr. Vincent Ziccardi [chair of the Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Department] invested in developing such a strong residency program that is nationally recognized and is one of the most sought-after programs in the country. And this was my number one choice.”

Years later, Shanti has now returned to RSDM to join Ziccardi’s team as the new director of the oral and maxillofacial surgery residency training program and the inaugural director of maxillofacial oncology. Previously, he was an assistant professor of oral and maxillofacial surgery at the University of Pennsylvania.

“When the opportunity came up at Rutgers, I was excited because it is a place, an institution that was very special to me,” said Shanti. “Right now is a really exciting time within the university because there’s a lot of growth.”

An expert in head and neck tumors with a focus on oral cancer, jaw tumors, and salivary gland tumors, he hopes to contribute to the school’s growth by establishing an oral oncology practice. “As an oral maxillofacial surgeon, I feel like we have to be involved in the care of cancer patients because we bring a unique perspective because of our background in dentistry, surgery, and medicine,” he said.

Shanti is now a provider at RSDM’s faculty practice. He is also affiliated with University Hospital Newark, Saint Peter’s University Hospital, and Newark Beth Israel Medical Center.

Dentistry, cancer care, or academia weren’t where Shanti pictured himself growing up.

It all began with his hometown orthodontist’s positive impact on his life. Shanti planned to follow his dentist’s footsteps, but meeting RSDM alum and oral maxillofacial surgeon Thomas Flynn ’76 in dental school changed his course.

“I didn’t even really know what oral maxillofacial surgery was [until then],” Shanti said. Flynn not only introduced him to the field but also invited him to the operating room and became his research mentor. The more Shanti learned, the more he liked it, leading him to RSDM’s residency program.

All along the way, he continued with research, too. He already published over 90 peer-reviewed articles and book chapters. He received grants from the National Institutes of Health, Osteo Science Foundation, and Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Foundation for his projects as well. “When we think of the future, it’s going to be really scientific investigation and research,” he said, “which will define how we look at cancer as a whole and better target the tumor in treatment.”

At RSDM, he will continue this pursuit and create research opportunities for students. Moreover, he aspires to guide the next generation into their careers.

“I’ve gotten here by having some really exceptional mentors and educators that have invested in me,” he said. “I really want to pay it forward.”



RSDM’s First Female African American Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Resident

Gladys Johnson Whitten believes people become what they see. But she knows first-hand that seeing itself isn’t enough. One should also have the inner drive to set loftier goals. In her case, that was becoming an oral surgeon in the 70s.

“We were in a different place in time than now,” she said, regarding the discouragement and open opposition to women in the then-male-dominated specialty.

She will always remember how easily men dismissed her when she interviewed for oral surgery residency programs. At a New York oral surgery program, “I had three male oral surgeons lean across the table and say, ‘How did you get an interview? We don’t take women in this program,’” she recounted. “Now you have legal recourse, but back then in ’77, they got away with it.”

But RSDM, then New Jersey Dental School, was different, where oral surgeons first piqued her interest and then encouraged her to apply.

Whitten was a DMD candidate at RSDM when she got involved with the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery. The school had partnered with Georgetown University for a pain study, and Whitten was responsible for recording patient post-surgical pain data for that as a student researcher. “I had a lot of exposure...especially for that first case of the day, I’d go in the room, see what the surgeons were doing, and they talked me into it,” she said.

In 1978, she went straight from the DMD program into the residency program. She became RSDM’s first female African American oral and maxillofacial surgery resident. This was a joint program with Martland Hospital, which is now called University Hospital. She was the first female oral surgery resident in the hospital program as well.

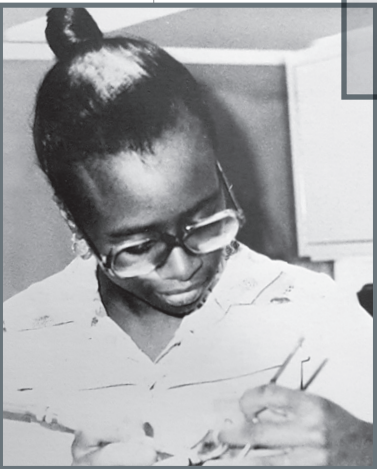
After completing her residency in 1981, she launched her career in Dallas, Texas. She opened her own practice. “The

Lubbock has the biggest trauma center in the region, she noted. “I treated all types of traumas, including gunshot wounds,” she said, as well as other pathology. Whitten maintained that for 24 years. She participated in the hospital call schedule to provide care for her community and surrounding areas while also running her own private practice.

She also became a role model for young women, who often called her for insight into the profession as a female. She told them how rewarding yet challenging the job can be. An emergency call could mean having to skip family events, leave birthday parties, and once, a complex



Above: Whitten with fellow residents. The photo was taken in Whitten’s third year when she was a chief resident in the oral surgery program.



Left: Whitten as a DMD candidate at New Jersey Dental School, now Rutgers School of Dental Medicine

“The training that we received in dental school and in the hospital residency program was just excellent. It allowed us to be able to feel confident and work independently.”

training that we received in dental school and in the hospital residency program was just excellent,” she said. “It allowed us to be able to feel confident and work independently.” She also taught at Baylor’s College of Dentistry until she moved to her husband’s hometown, Lubbock, Texas.

trauma case caused her to miss most of Christmas day altogether. In 2014, she sold her practice but continued doing oral surgery for two days a month for a state correctional hospital. In 2020, during the pandemic, Whitten fully retired after 39 years of practicing oral surgery.

“Dentistry is an awesome profession,” she said. “It offers a lot of opportunities.”



Speaking from Experience

Like the rest of us, Heather Smith-Briggs '04 has had ups and downs in her career. A down was on one of her happiest days when she delivered her son and learned her boss sold the practice.

"I never had postpartum depression, but I had 'Oh, my God, I don't have a job depression,'" she said.

She leverages experiences and moments of learning like this to help other dentists with their careers. She lectures on a number of subjects, like contracts, insurance, and dental service organizations (DSOs).

A native of New Jersey, Smith-Briggs is the oldest of four. "We grew up very frugal," she said. Her mother worked nights and her dad worked days. "We only went to the dentist when something hurt or when we had a swelling or an abscess in our mouth," she said. "I wanted to change that."

She majored in biology with a minor in chemistry and then applied to dental schools. She got accepted to all but chose Rutgers, then UMDNJ. "I was just impressed immediately," she said. "The class sizes were smaller, it seemed much more intimate, and it just felt like a perfect fit when I came to interview."

She got involved with student government and met some of her lifelong mentors, like Eileen Hoskin, associate professor of professional practice and director of operative dentistry. "[She] was probably one of the most positive influences while I was at school," said Smith-Briggs. She still vividly remembers how one day, she spent three hours making a temp, which accidentally got sucked by the vacuum just as she was about done. "I almost cried that day, right there," she said. "[Dr. Hoskin] came over and made a new temp in five minutes. Boom, boom, like it was nothing. And she said to me 'You win some and you lose some, but you've got to just keep your head up and keep going.'"

And Smith-Briggs kept at it. She graduated in 2004 and did a yearlong

residency at the Jersey Shore Medical Center in Neptune. She has been with the same office for 15 years, which became a branch of ProSmile. She started out as a dentist and climbed up to her current role, the chief dental officer for ProSmile in October 2021.

"We are the largest private entity treating the Medicaid population," she said. Pulling from this experience, she has a lecture called "Treat the Patient, not the Insurance." She informs dentists about different kinds of insurance and dispels treatment and insurance misconceptions.

She also made it her goal to show what DSOs can offer. "The face of dentistry is changing," she said. "When you work in the office with one other person, you are limited to the knowledge that you and that person have. With a DSO, the patient base is there, you build your speed and skills faster, and more importantly, you have this network of doctors around you."

She recently came back to RSDM to tell students about ProSmile and deliver her lecture on insurance. "The students were very interested, very engaged," she said. Smith-Briggs herself also re-engaged with the RSDM Alumni Association as a class representative. "It's nice to see that a lot of the same faculty are still here, even though it's 20 years later."



Back as Clinical Faculty

Doctors often need to educate their patients. But Allison Sceppaguerccio '15 discovered a knack for teaching while tutoring underclassmen. She enjoyed it so much so that she enrolled in RSDM's "From Practice to Preceptor" program, which trained dental professionals to work with students in the classroom and clinic.

"The clinical teaching experience portion of it was really great," said Sceppaguerccio, who now employs those learnings as a clinical instructor at RSDM. "I had a little bit of a dry run that was definitely helpful in transitioning."

Since September, she has been spending a day in the clinic with predoctoral students. For the rest, she practices at Clark Family Dental Associates. "It works out really nicely," she said. "It just is really interesting ... to try and contribute something to the student experience."

Sceppaguerccio is the first dentist in her family. She's been exposed to health care through her nurse mother and to working with hands through her technician father. But the idea of becoming a dentist came from her orthodontist. "We spent a long time together [in treatment], and he said, 'you should do this,'" Sceppaguerccio recalled.

She began to test out the idea.

She shadowed dentists and volunteered at a dental clinic. "I surrounded myself with dentistry to see if I liked it and what it was all about," she said. She attended RSDM's pathway programs as a high schooler and also during college before enrolling in the DMD program. "It felt already familiar and comfortable as an environment once I came in," she said. "And then we just happened to have a very cohesive class."

On the clinic floor now, she often thinks back to those days, shaping how she is as an instructor. "There are black-and-white dentistry things that they need to learn," she said. "But it's a matter of trying to help mold them and guide them so that they can feel confident in what they're doing and start to build their own little persona of how they're going to be as a clinician."

And teaching is a mutually beneficial process.

"Dentistry can be very isolating because most people work independently," she said. At RSDM, she finds the opportunity to engage with students, who make her think about dentistry differently with their fresh

"It just is really interesting to try and **contribute something to the student experience.**"

eyes and questions. Conversations with faculty help her keep a pulse on what's new in dentistry. "It's good to be talking critically about dentistry with others."

She hopes other alumni will consider doing the same and join her efforts.

"If people remember themselves in the shoes of current students, they'd be so much more inclined to want to come back," she said. "There's so much we can give them."

TEXAS MEET UP

RSDM hosted an alumni reception at the American Dental Association SmileCon in Houston, Texas. It brought together alumni with faculty as well as current students who made the trip to the conference.



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Many Thanks to Our Generous Donors

All donations and pledges were made between **July 1, 2022, and June 30, 2023.**

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Above:
Rosemichelle Sorvino-
Macchia '91 (left), Ed Feins '91,
Jeff Panicucci '91, Lisa Berkowitz-
Latella '91, and Nathalie Scarpa-
Lota '91.

Below: Members of the Class of
1997 George “Ed” Rankin (left),
Oscar Grob, Lori Vanderwende-
Bleeker, Philip Baldo, Edward
Suchora, Helene Zimmes, Donald
Lapine, and Ryan Maher.

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and Mrs. Denise Lombardo Panicucci
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Justin H. Stone, DDS,
and Dr. Diana Joy Stone
Andrew Joseph Sullivan, DDS
Steven S. Toth, DMD
Elizabeth Corte Tramontana, DMD
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**Eileen Hoskin '84 (left), Carina Fairfield '20,
Hannah Benn '20, Ben Paulussen '20, Donald
Lapine '97.**

RUTGERS SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE TIMELINE



JANUARY

90 percent of fourth-year students seeking placement in postdoctoral programs were matched—far above the national average of 64 percent.

FEBRUARY

The Rutgers University Board of Governors approved Gary Heir as the Robert and Susan Carmel Chair in Algesiobiology at RSDM. It is the first professorship in the nation in algesiobiology dedicated to orofacial pain.



MARCH

RSDM researchers developed a nutrition education tool to help older adults with tooth loss.



APRIL

RSDM pre and postdoctoral students showcased research conducted last summer at the virtual Balbo Day.

MAY

Class of 2022 received their degrees at an in-person convocation ceremony in Newark's New Jersey Performing Arts Center.



JUNE

Colgate-Palmolive opened its Volpe Clinical Research Center, named after the late Anthony Volpe, who was a member of RSDM's inaugural Class of 1960 and Colgate's vice president of worldwide clinical research.



JULY

RSDM welcomed its new predoctoral students, postdoctoral students, and residents. From a pool of 3,162 applicants, 91 were selected to attend the traditional DMD program. Additionally, 41 postgraduate students and residents joined the advanced dental education programs.



AUGUST

Since taking roots two years ago, Holocaust Survivors Program served a total of 60 Holocaust survivors at no cost.

SEPTEMBER

Two days, 14.5 hours, 500 questions—that's what makes up the Integrated National Board Dental Examination. Close to 100 percent of the Class of 2023 successfully passed this comprehensive exam.



The Star-Ledger



OCTOBER

Dean Cecile A. Feldman lent her expertise to weigh in on a new bipartisan bill, Dental Care for Our Troops Act, in an op-ed for *The Star-Ledger*.

NOVEMBER

The annual Donor/Scholar Reception brought together alumni, donors, and scholars for a celebration at RSDM.



DECEMBER

RSDM kicked off its inaugural Alumni Virtual CDE Series, which was attended by 45 alumni around the country.



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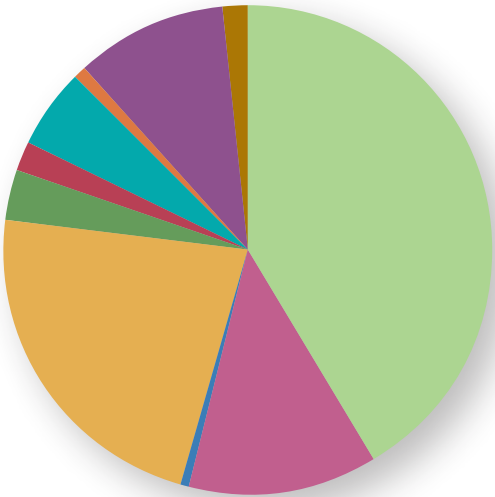
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NOT PICTURED:
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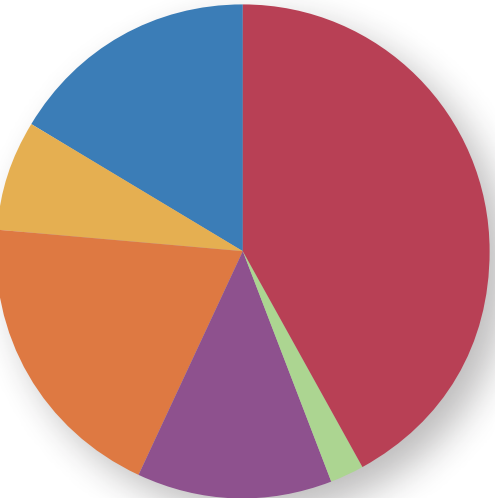
FINANCIALS **FY2022**



Revenues \$90,785,187.68

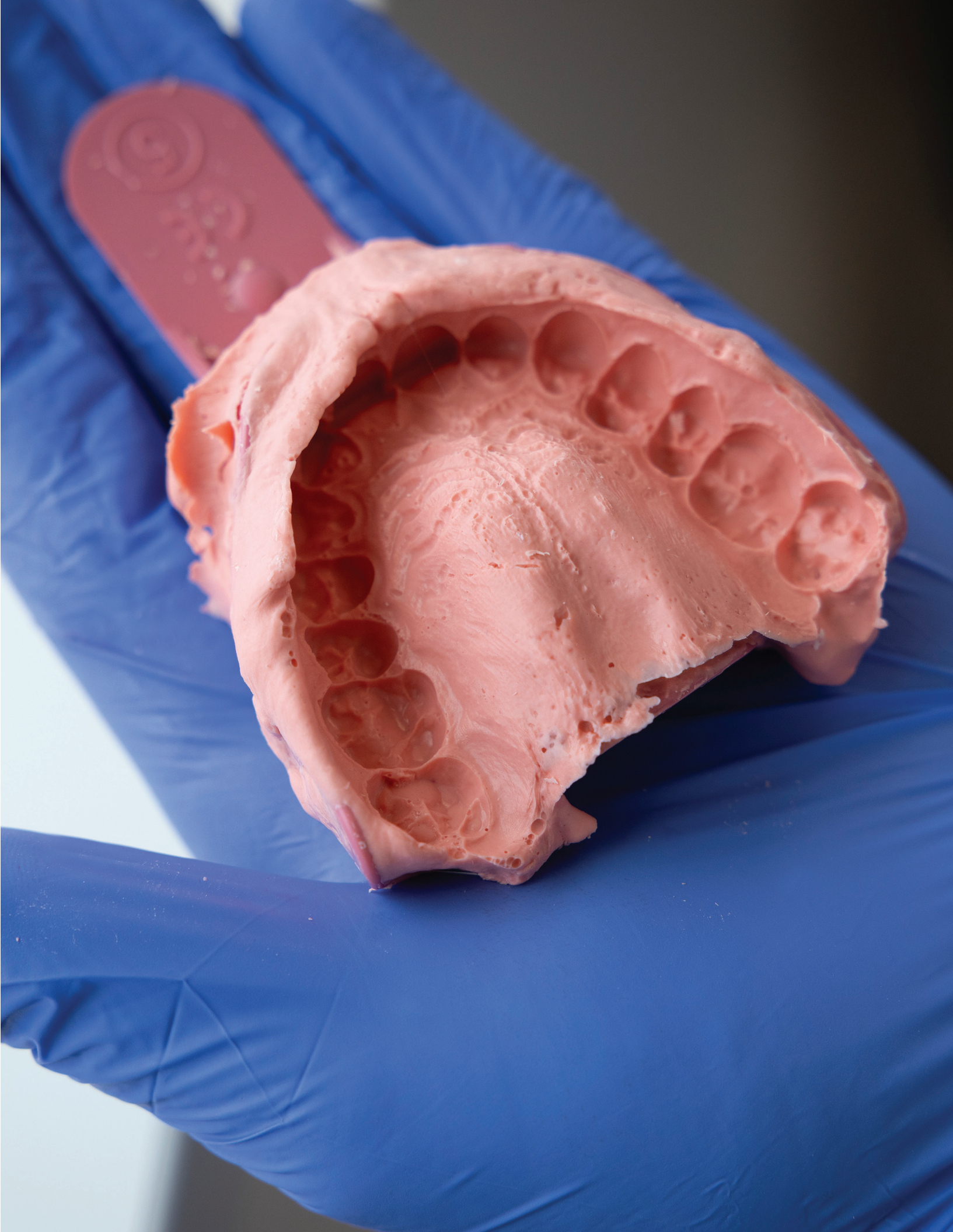
	2022 ACTUAL	PERCENT
Tuition and Fees	\$37,550	41.4%
State Paid Fringe Revenues	\$11,550	12.7%
Endowments, Investments, Contributions & Gifts *	\$463	0.5%
Net Patient Service Revenues	\$20,536	22.6%
Housestaff Recoveries	\$2,840	3.1%
Affiliate Revenues	\$1,834	2.0%
Recoveries of Direct Grant Expense	\$4,740	5.2%
Indirect Cost Recoveries	\$870	1.0%
State Appropriations & Allocated University Support	\$9,174	10.1%
Other	\$1,228	1.4%
TOTAL REVENUES	\$90,785	100.0%

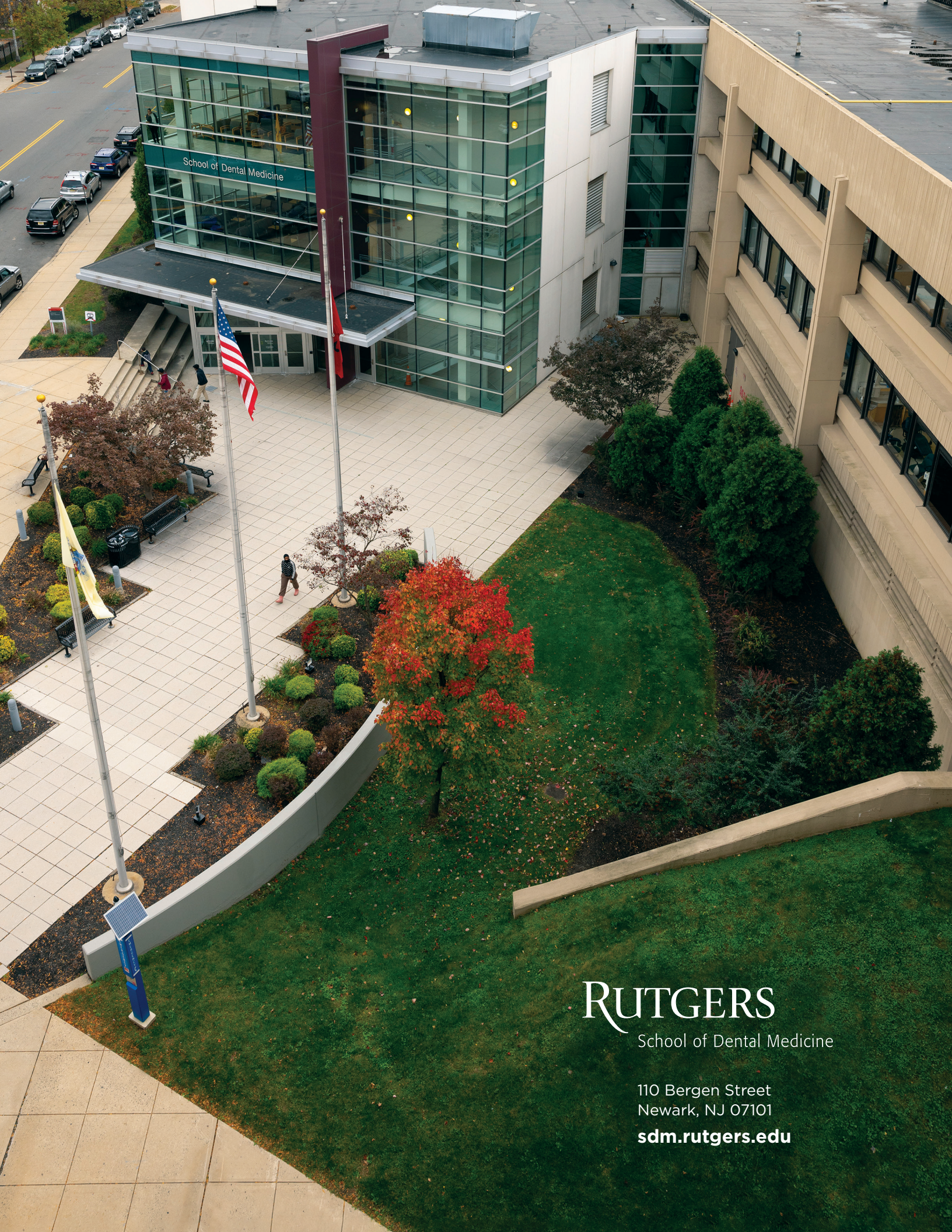
*For FY22 RSDM received \$2,017,614 gift-in-kind donations and principal raised toward RSDM Endowments, which are reflected in the total above.



Expenses \$90,517,292.08

	2021 ACTUAL	PERCENT
Salaries and Wages	\$38,233	42.2%
Housestaff Salaries	\$2,011	2.2%
Fringe Benefits	\$11,402	12.6%
Non-Salary	\$17,591	19.4%
Transfers	\$6,659	7.4%
Central Costs	\$14,621	16.2%
TOTAL EXPENSES	\$90,517	100.0%





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