

# Inspiration

ANNUAL REPORT 2023 - 2024



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.



## A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN

Inspiration is a word that encompasses learning, discovery, and excitement—all the sentiments I deeply feel around me here in our school, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM). I walk by the pre-clinic and see how our faculty fuels our students' passion for dentistry. Our students touch the lives of our patients by alleviating their pain and improving their quality of life in the clinics. Our patients' trust in us inspires us to be excellent providers. Our staff build relationships that transcend their job descriptions and genuinely make us a community. In our labs, faculty and students collectively pursue learning and discovery at the highest academic level. I find inspiration in these everyday moments at RSDM.

We are lucky to be in a profession in which inspiration can take so many forms. In my career, research along with education have been my passions and sources of inspiration. For some

others, inspiration can come from a patient interaction, a mentorship exchange, or advocacy work. Or it can be found in something outside the school. Maybe your source is music, art, or nature like it is for me.

Wherever it may come from, I love that inspiration is a two-way street. We inspire while being inspired and vice versa. As you read the stories from our community, I hope you can also feel the daily inspiration I witness at RSDM. I also hope you find stories that resonate with you and serve as an inspiration for your future undertakings.

Warm regards,

**Cecile A. Feldman, DMD, MBA**

Dean and Distinguished Professor  
Rutgers School of Dental Medicine



## A MESSAGE FROM THE CHANCELLOR

For years, I have witnessed the remarkable work of Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) as it prepares the next generation of health care providers to advance the field and champion health equity. From volunteering to leading initiatives in underserved communities, RSDM has been an inspiration to Rutgers Health, exemplifying the values of empathy, equity, and excellence that define dentistry and our mission.

Beyond the confines of New Jersey, RSDM ventures on mission trips to the Dominican Republic and South Dakota, engaging with communities in need on a global scale. Through these initiatives and others like the Holocaust Survivors and the Vet Smiles programs, RSDM not only serves diverse populations but also trains future dentists with these communities in mind. For RSDM students, these trips and programs are eye-opening experiences. These exchanges are transformative for both parties, promoting compassionate health care.

Adding to its contributions, RSDM is at the forefront of groundbreaking research aimed at transforming health care. The school's renowned

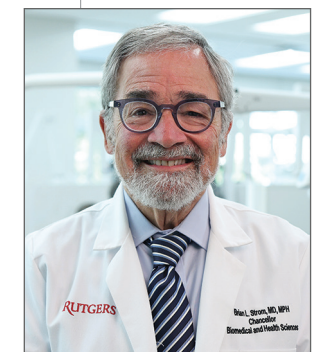
center for orofacial pain attracts patients from around the world, offering hope and relief to those suffering from long-term pain. A recent study revealed potential of cannabidiol to mitigate acute dental pain. Moreover, Dean Cecile Feldman's pioneering research on opioids in dentistry underscores the school's leadership in critical areas of study. Recently, Dean Feldman was honored with the American Dental Education Association's William J. Gies Award for Eminence in Vision and Leadership, a testament to her transformative work.

I continue to be inspired by my RSDM colleagues and the school's commitment to education, patient care, and research. I'm certain you will be equally inspired as you explore the stories in the following pages.

Sincerely,

**Brian L. Strom, MD, MPH**

Chancellor, Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences  
Executive Vice President for Health Affairs at Rutgers University



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# Students



With their inquisitive minds, our students grow into passionate dental professionals as they master the art and science of oral health care at RSDM.

## A Family Affair

**D**ifferent generations often attend Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM). But it's quite rare when three family members study at the same time.

Luis Santana, a fourth-year student in the traditional DMD program, has been joined by his mother Nelia Espeso and his wife Lesly Rocha this year. A Cuban-trained dentist, Santana's mother is in the internationally educated DMD program and studies alongside third-year students. His wife is a first-year student in the traditional DMD program.

"It's very special," said Santana. "But it also feels weird that I'm the D-4, and my mom is D-3. I'm asking her for dental advice all the time, and she's asking me about software we use in the clinic." For his mother, this is a proud family moment.

In Cuba, Espeso was a general dentist with advanced training. "When I practiced [dentistry] for the first time, I knew it was my passion," she said. She also spread that passion through teaching at

a university. However, she left her career behind 12 years ago when she and her son moved to the US. Though she couldn't practice as a dentist, she began working as a dental hygienist.

"I was happy as a hygienist, but I felt like I lacked something all the time," she said. While in the clinic, she would overhear dentists' conversations in the other room and think, "I want to do that." That inner voice brought her to RSDM, to which some of her former students from Cuba had attended. "The feedback [from them] was very positive," said Espeso. "This is an amazing school." She now shares the classroom with one of her old students from Cuba and has been learning the latest dental techniques. "Dentistry developed in the 20 years," she noted. With her RSDM degree, she will be able to step back into her dentist coat and might even teach again one day.

Until then, she continues to inspire others around her, like her daughter-in-law. "The first person that told me about dentistry was her," said Rocha, who knew she

wanted to go into health care. After shadowing a dentist, she also caught the dentistry bug and followed in her husband's footsteps to RSDM.

Said Santana of his wife, "I feel glad I can help her now because I already covered that path. Three years ago, she was helping me all the time. She was working and taking classes at the same time. She was also helping me in the house, making sure I could study."

A-soon-to-be-dentist, Santana's interest in the field developed naturally through his mother. He enrolled at RSDM because "the clinical experience is priceless," he said. It proved to be true, especially when he began making dentures—his least favorite subject in the classroom that turned into his favorite clinical procedure. "Patients can smile back again; they can eat again," he said. "It makes me really proud."

After everyone graduates, the family hopes to go back to Miami. "I dream of having a big clinic," said Santana, "with all of us working together."

## Full Circle

At age 10, Joseph Choukair took a fall while playing and hit his face on the edge of a table. Something wiggled in his mouth. He touched it, and his front tooth came off with its root.

"I thought my life was over," he said. He knew that was his adult tooth and would never grow back. He worried about his appearance and about going to school.

The family rushed to their dentist with the tooth in their pocket. Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) alum Stephen S. Grober '99 did a root canal, reimplanted the tooth, and splinted it with braces. "It was so inspiring for a ten-year-old," said Choukair. "He made a difference in my life that day and made me want to do dentistry." Choukair earned his dental degree from RSDM this May and will start the school's periodontics post-graduate program in the fall.

"It's a great feeling to see somebody take a path that you kind of help them decide to do, and then they do it and be successful at it," said Grober, who noticed Choukair's interest in the profession early on. "He was just really intuitive and into everything we were doing, like when I did some work on his father, he would come to watch. Joseph is going to be a great periodontist, and I'm looking forward to maybe taking our relationship one step further and working together soon."



Joseph Choukair (left) with his dentist and mentor Stephen Grober '99

That tooth held in place for eight years until Choukair had to get an implant during college. For his undergraduate education, he chose Rutgers-Newark. He joined pre-health and pre-dental student clubs. He shadowed dentists. He also attended RSDM's Gateway to Dentistry program, an immersion program for college students.

"It was the best experience ever for anyone interested in dentistry," he said. "I felt like I was a dental student for two weeks."

Soon after, he became an RSDM student. He excelled at his studies and was inducted into the Omega Omega Chapter of Omicron Kappa Upsilon (OKU), the national dental honor society.

He was selected as an ambassador for the Gateway to Dentistry and the high school program Decision for Dentistry. He returned to his undergraduate student clubs as a guest speaker. He wanted to give back because, as a first-generation college graduate and first-generation doctor, he was on his own. "These programs helped me in my journey," he said. "I wanted to help make it better for the next cohort."

At RSDM, Choukair continued to find support from the community. "All the faculty are very supportive....One thing I like about the Rutgers culture is that everybody knows everybody. Everyone has genuine care for each other. We just like to care for each other, and the same goes for the students."

During his studies, he discovered a passion for periodontics. "Ever since I got my implant, I was intrigued by surgery and esthetics," he said. A course with Professor of Periodontics Joel Pascuzzi confirmed his path. "I attribute this to his lectures and making them very interesting." Besides enjoying the course material, he liked periodontics' comprehensive look at cases. He was also excited by the future of the specialty with the increasing longevity. "We're going to see a much older population, more periodontitis, and peri-implantitis in the future," he said. "I think it's going to be an ever-growing field."

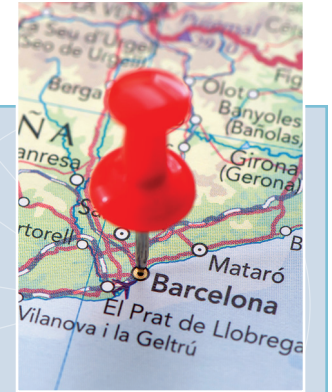
Just a few weeks before graduation, Choukair saw a patient come in with a fallen tooth with its root intact, or an avulsion, he'd call as a dentist. "It just felt like a circle of life moment that day," he said. "What better way to end my last day than having a case with an avulsion, the reason why I wanted to do dentistry."



**Leader in the Making**  
James Tomasello of the Class of 2025 was awarded the Oral Health Foundation of Pierre Fauchard Academy's 2024 Student Scholarship Award. This scholarship award recognizes students who have shown greatest potential into becoming leaders in the dental profession.

## Barcelona Visitors

Two students, **Olga Miralles** and **Sofia Navarro**, from Universitat Internacional de Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain, came to RSDM for an externship during which they observed clinics and audited lectures.



## On a Solid Footing

Adam Eljarrah was working as a medical scribe in the emergency department of a Hackensack hospital when the pandemic broke. At the time, he was testing the waters for going into medical school. But the world-altering event also altered his career plans.

"There were many poorer outcomes," said Eljarrah, referring to the lives lost during the pandemic. "I wanted to be in a more positive health care setting."

He started thinking about what he enjoyed at the hospital. He liked being able to make an immediate impact on patients' lives. He also liked getting to know patients over time. Both of those pointed him to dentistry. Eljarrah is now a first-year student in Rutgers School of Dental Medicine's (RSDM) DMD program. In undergrad, Eljarrah studied psychology and began developing an interest in the health care field. Upon graduation, he worked at the New York Simulation Center which taught medicine through simulation. He also worked as a clinical research assistant at a different hospital.

As his interest grew, he wanted to dive deeper into biomedical sciences and enrolled in Rutgers' master's program in biomedical sciences. He was on the medical scholars track and got more involved in research, studying breast cancer. During the program, he became a scribe in Hackensack, where the pandemic pushed him to reevaluate his path and veered him to dentistry.

He, again, tried it out and volunteered at a dental organization that provided free care. "I was really struck by how many



people were waiting overnight just to have one day of care," he said. "It just showed the importance of dentistry."

The next step was dental school, and RSDM's comprehensive clinical requirements appealed to him. "There's no way around getting clinical experience, making clinical decisions other than just practicing [hands-on]," Eljarrah said. "Rutgers has extensive clinical requirements, and I want to practice in New Jersey, so it made sense to me to be a student here."

So far, he has been enjoying the program. The curriculum, he found, reinforces dental concepts across different courses. Pre-clinic courses have been challenging him but seeing his own growth and improvement, he said, have been rewarding.

"The faculty are very passionate about what they teach. That's been infectious, and I feed off their enthusiasm," said Eljarrah. "That to me says, I'm just in the right program."

## Student Piece Published

A piece written by **Tishana Foster '25**, president of American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry's RSDM Chapter, was featured in the organization's publication, *Pediatric Dentistry Today*.



## Five Residents, Five Programs, Five Reasons

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) offers advanced dental education programs in endodontics, general practice residency, oral and maxillofacial surgery, orofacial pain, orthodontics, pediatric dentistry, periodontics, and prosthodontics. Five residents from five of these programs tell us why they chose RSDM.

### DAVID CIFELLI

Hometown: Millstone Township, New Jersey  
Program: Endodontics

In my case, I chose to stay at RSDM, where I attended dental school. I felt connected to the RSDM community, and I was very excited to have the opportunity to continue my education here. It is also close to home, and I enjoy being able to serve patients from all over New Jersey. The program, while challenging, has provided extensive clinical experience and a comprehensive didactic education which helps us understand the scientific basis of what we do. What I like most is the collegial atmosphere of the department. The faculty are helpful and supportive, and my co-residents have become some of my best friends.



### URVASHI KESWANI

Hometown: Mumbai, India  
Program: Periodontics

Apart from the state-of-the-art facilities and diverse patient population, RSDM has some of the best clinicians serving as faculty along with residents who have graduated from some of the top dental schools in the nation. To be in the company of such bright minds and being trained by such skilled clinicians has truly been a blessing! I feel like I have my own little family away from family where I can learn, grow, and mature not only as a clinician but also on a personal level. As a resident, I get constructive mentorship in periodontics from some great clinicians

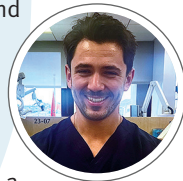


serving as faculty at Rutgers and have had the opportunity to collaborate with residents in other programs to deliver comprehensive care to our patients.

### TYLER MADAY

Hometown: Randolph, New Jersey  
Program: General Practice Residency (GPR)

When I started looking at GPR programs, I wanted a program with a very good reputation that was also close to home. Rutgers quickly came to mind. One of the key factors that made Rutgers stand out amongst other programs was the amount of time they spent on building and solidifying a strong foundation in general dentistry with an emphasis on medicine. In my mind, this is what makes a dentist the best provider to their patients. Then you add the fact that Rutgers is one of the few programs to offer a second year in advanced training in special needs dentistry, which was a path I wanted to take, I was sold. The program has shown me how much a general dentist is capable of. One of the best aspects of this program is how I am not limited to one specific procedure. If there is a procedure or technique I'd like to learn or perform, the faculty is fully equipped and excited to teach me.

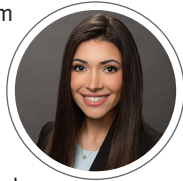


### STEPHANIE SILVA

Hometown: Warren, New Jersey  
Program: Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

Rutgers offers a broad oral and maxillofacial surgical experience consisting of orthognathic, trauma, head and neck cancer, temporomandibular disorders, and den-toalveolar. We're a busy service with high

volume, but still promote a positive culture and good work/life balance. Being from New Jersey, I felt right at home coming to Rutgers for my training! I really like the autonomy that this program provides us with. Residents can make decisions while being supported by faculty, enabling us to grow as surgeons. I also really like that we have a very strong hands-on experience, both in the outpatient clinic and operating room, which begins in our early years of training. We are also extremely lucky to be trained by such brilliant faculty who provide us with expertise in their respective fields.



### JOSNA THANKACHAN

Hometown: Kerala, India  
Program: Prosthodontics

RSDM provides an environment with ample opportunities to get skilled in the desired specialty in dentistry, especially prosthodontics. We get an immense amount of clinical experience because of the large patient population that comes to Rutgers. Our three years of prosthodontics training can be considered golden years for us residents because of the complexity of the cases and advanced treatments that we are exposed to in our clinics. I think this is a vital part of any good residency. The supportive faculty further enriches this chapter of learning. Though this program sometimes feels physically demanding, its essence lies in the vitality of each new day and every thought-provoking case. The canvas we work on is ever-changing, allowing for creativity to flourish once the basics are mastered. The critical skills of treatment planning and problem-solving are my current pursuits in shaping my evolution as a prosthodontist.



Daniel Brigham (left) with RSDM student Zain Ahmed in Washington DC.

## Navy to Dentistry

Daniel Brigham's resume is so versatile that it would stand out in any pool. He has a background in political science, taught English in China, joined the Navy, and worked in the corporate world.

"Changing careers often has suited me because it has kept life interesting," he said, "and it's made things more challenging."

But he hopes the last stop in his career journey will be dentistry. He's a second-year student at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine's (RSDM) traditional DMD program. After launching his career, he aspires to become an advocate for underserved communities and veterans.

Brigham has been with the Navy for 12 years and is still in the Reserves. He joined the Navy because it combined his interest in travel, international relations, and water—a perk of growing up on the coast of Maryland. At 28, he became a surface warfare officer. His first ship was a destroyer homeported in Japan. Then he moved to San Diego, California, and was put in charge of 60 sailors on a larger ship. "We went to a lot of countries in the Middle East," he said. They also had a dentist on board. "Sometimes I would observe some

dental procedures for fun," he said. "I was like, 'Okay, this seems kind of cool.'"

But it hadn't crossed his mind to become a dentist until many years later when he left the Navy and began working at an IT company. Brigham and his team implemented electronic health records and computer software systems in hospitals. When a close friend of his from the Navy became a dentist, that gave Brigham the idea and made him feel it was a possibility.

He quit his IT job and went back to school for two years to take prerequisites for dental school. In the meantime, he worked part-time in the Reserves. As he was getting ready to enroll at RSDM, he was mobilized to the Middle East, delaying dental school for two years.

"It's been a long journey, but I think that it'll be fulfilling," said Brigham, who will be 42 when he completes the program. "There are pros and cons to starting a career this

late, but for me, it was the right thing to do. I wouldn't trade the experiences I had for anything. I was much shyer, more introverted as a 22-year-old, so I think it'll be much easier to work with patients now."

At RSDM, he's been finding support from his classmates. "They're just awesome," he said. "It's a difficult program, but my classmates make the process a lot easier. They've been very generous helping me in the lab, sharing notes and resources, preparing for tests."

Recently, he went to Washington DC with the American Institute of Dental Public Health's Federal Service Immersion Program. It took him to the National Institute of Health, Health Resources and Services Administration, and the Hill, where he met with professionals and congressmen working on dental public health policy.

"It was very inspiring," he said. "That might be another avenue that I would pursue in the future....Because I would like to be more involved with dentistry beyond the daily clinical practice."

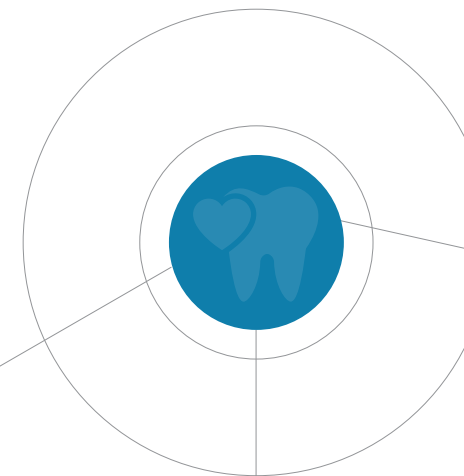
## Soon-to-be-Grads Match with Dental Programs

From New Jersey to Georgia to Hawaii, members of the Class of 2024 were selected for post-graduate dental programs across the nation through the **Post-doctoral Dental Matching Program**. Of the 36 RSDM students who sought placement through the program, 31 were successful, setting the school's match rate at 86 percent, which is significantly over the national rate of 66 percent. In addition to those matched, 14 students received placements outside the dental match program, bringing RSDM's overall placement rate to 90 percent. Moreover, 52 students went into private practice.





# Community



Through mission trips, projects, and advocacy work, RSDM enters communities around the nation and the world to make lasting impact on others while also being transformed by the work.

## Trip of Many Missions

**O**n her left wrist, Hannah Ciullo carries a daily reminder of courage. The ocean blue bracelet she wears was made by a little girl she treated on the school's annual mission trip to the Dominican Republic.

"Sometimes I get feelings like, 'I can't do this. This is too hard for me. This is too complex,'" she said. "I look at this bracelet, and I just remember, I can do it."

Ciullo went to La Romana, Dominican Republic, as part of a program run by Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) in collaboration with World of Smiles. Surrounded by sugarcane fields, villagers of La Romana have sugar-heavy diets with limited oral health care. "There are poor areas in the United States, but you don't see the level of poverty you see there," said the trip's organizer Assistant Dean of

Student Affairs, Diversity, and Inclusion Herminio Perez. He recounted how people often live in dirt-floor houses and wear soleless shoes. "Even though they need things, they are grateful that you are there and share with you the little that they have." Like that bracelet.

The dental clinic is in a local school, Fundación Mir, and operates year-round with volunteer doctors from various schools. While dentists mostly treat children, parents and school staff frequent the clinic too. Perez organized RSDM's first trip in 2017 with four students and a few dentists. That year, the group treated 86 patients in four days. Seven years later, the number of students doubled, so did patient numbers. The team performed 346 dental procedures ranging from extractions to restorations to cleanings. Over the years, the program's impact began to manifest itself

visually. "Seven years ago, we saw rampant decay all over the place," said Perez. With the implementation of preventative measures, such as silver diamine fluoride treatment to reduce cavities, "the difference is huge."

Perez's career began with caring for people in the South Bronx, who experience barriers to access. This led him to devote his skills to increasing access. "I found my mission as a clinician," he said. He brings this calling to RSDM through the annual trip. Besides making a positive change in the community, he believes the mission emphasizes the humanistic aspect of dentistry that can sometimes be forgotten during the day-to-day of the job and transforms volunteer dentists.

Sonika Shah '18, a three-time participant in the program, can attest to that. Shah always had an affinity for outreach

Scan the code to watch a recap video from the trip →



to keep the consistency for kids because a big part of pediatrics is not just doing the work but building a relationship.”

Similarly, Jalen Bonitto of the Class of 2025, found his calling as a pediatric dentist through this experience. Bonitto heard about the mission during his interview day when applying. “It’s been on my mind since then,” he said. Going to the Dominican Republic, he was partly excited and partly anxious because of the volume of the patients they’d treat. “My biggest fear as a dental student is that I’ll be really slow with my time, but this program gave me a lot of confidence in myself and my abilities,” he said. He discovered a knack for treating kids. Because none cried during his treatments, he earned the nickname child whisperer. “It’s really rewarding to get a child to open up, be willing, and be comfortable to receive dental treatment without fear,” he said. This, and other volunteer opportunities at the school, he said reminds him why he set out to do dentistry: helping people.

Being able to serve the community was also what inspired Ciullo to become a dentist. She did RSDM’s Gateway to Dentistry program for college students and heard about this mission trip. She awaited the email in her third year. “It was career-changing,” she said. She had a chance to learn from dentists who supported students during the clinic, taught them new techniques, and debriefed after each day. “I learned a lot about my own skills in dentistry. It taught me to give myself a little bit more grace because I’m critical about myself, my work, and my timing,” said Ciullo, who is applying to general practice residency programs. A student doctor, she felt she could give back to the community. The dentists, however, gave back to the community, to the student doctors, and also to their profession.

“As professionals, we are ethically obligated to share our knowledge, resources, and skills with others,” she said. “Leaving that trip, I just couldn’t wait to go back one day and do the same.”



Top: Jalen Bonitto '25 explaining dental procedure on RSDM’s Floss-saurus. Bottom left: Team of RSDM student volunteers including Hannah Ciullo '25 (second from left) and Jalen Bonitto '25 (second from right). Bottom right: Alumna Sonika Shah '18 with children at the Dominican Republic.



work because her mother, who grew up in India, went to a free dental clinic for most of her childhood. “That’s always kind of been ingrained in me,” she said. “[The trip] is the most gratifying work I’m able to do.”

The first time she went on the mission trip was in its inaugural year as a student. She was contemplating going into pediatric dentistry. “I remember coming back

from the trip being like, I want to do it.” It also helped her expand her skills and connect with other dentists. After becoming a pediatric dentist, she returned twice as an alumna. One of her patients from last year came up and hugged her this year. “Last year, he cried and screamed; this time he came in as happy as a clam,” she said. The patient’s mother expressed her gratitude. “It’s really heartwarming. I like going back

## RSDM on the Hill

In the nation’s capital, a group of fourth-year Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) students met with congressmen and senators to discuss critical issues for their soon-to-be profession. Why is student loan reform critical? What could be done about the shortage of dental care professionals? What needs to change with insurance for better patient care?

“We got to sit with them and discuss these things and share our personal views of why they’re important to us,” said George Soliman '24, one of the attendees. “It’s important for us to do this, participate, and share with them our perspective to make sure that we are heard and that they understand what we need for us and our patients as well.”

This exchange was organized by the American Dental Association (ADA) as part of its Dentist and Student Lobby Day. The event gathered dentists and dental students across the country to discuss three bipartisan bills, namely “Dental and Optometric Care (DOC) Access Act,” which aims to “prohibit dental and vision plans from setting the fees network doctors may charge for services not covered by the



insurers;” the Student Loan Reform that as its name suggests intends to reshape student loans; and the Action for Dental Health Act of 2023 that intends to “address critical gaps in the oral health workforce,” which was put forth by New Jersey Senator, Cory Booker.

RSDM students Parker Aldredge, Will Dadouris, Fred Darcy, Arya Ghandeharizadeh, Mina Goirgy, Matt Muniz, Mike Pignataro, and George Soliman all went to Washington DC to advocate for these three bills first-hand and learn about lobbying. On their collars, they wore tooth-shaped pins with the American flag, symbolizing their allegiance to what the ADA called the “tooth party,” which supports the best interest of dentistry and patients beyond party lines.

Soliman learned about the event through his role as a student trustee at the New Jersey Dental Association and attended because of his interest in policy and politics. “I wanted to get a feel for what goes on in Washington DC,” he said. In the process, he met others from across the country working to champion the dental profession. “I’m really thankful for that [opportunity].”

His classmate Dadouris felt the same way. “I wish I went earlier in dental school, not just our fourth year so that I could have

done more,” he said. During the conversations, he was surprised to uncover how little some representatives knew about the dental profession; he felt lucky to be among the few to share his experiences and insights. “I didn’t realize how important what we were doing was,” he said. “It was really cool to have that privilege to do it, so I’m glad I went.”

Another student, Darcy, noticed the importance of uniting as dentists. “We have to have a voice not only for us but for the patients as well,” he said, to avoid having laws and policies that do not protect either. “There’s a bunch of national rules that don’t protect our patients with insurance. That’s how we came to the DOC Access Act. And it takes people who know the day-to-day of what’s happening to go in and say, ‘Hey, this isn’t working, this isn’t okay, and we need to change it.’” While lobbying is one way of doing this, there are other venues to get involved, he said, such as through providing financial support and partaking in dental organizations.

“Organized dentistry,” he said, “is how we protect the profession and the people we serve.”



## Early Exposure

Essex County Newark Tech High School students came to RSDM’s Oral Radiology rotation to shadow our students taking radiographs.

## Tried and Loved

Exposure plays a critical part in career decisions. Because of that, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) offers pathway programs for varied ages and educational levels, to allow participants to get an insider's look into dentistry and dental school.

One of those is Gateway to Dentistry and another is the "Fundamentals of Pre-Clinical Dental Skills." Both are five-day programs that stimulate being a dental student for a whole week, allowing participants to take lectures, be in the lab, shadow clinic, and meet RSDM students and faculty mentors. They provide an opportunity for participants to test the waters before pursuing a dental degree.

The Gateway Program introduces college students and recent graduates to a wide career option in the dental profession. This year, 30 aspiring dental students attended the program, which reaffirmed most participants' desire, like Alexa Powers, a college senior preparing to apply to dental school.

"This program has been one of the best experiences I've had," she said. "This gave me the ability to see exactly what dental school is like and talk to actual dental students, so it makes me feel more comfortable with the path I'm taking, and it 100 percent solidified exactly what profession I want in the future."

Powers's interest in dentistry began with braces. "Just seeing ... how much of a change someone can make in my life with the way I smile inspired me to think that maybe this is the path I want to take," she said. At Pennsylvania State University, she began studying biology and taking the prerequisites for dental school. She joined pre-dental clubs and did some shadowing, but RSDM's Gateway Program gave her first dental school preview.

In the program, she met RSDM students



and learned that although dental school is demanding, there is a supportive community made up of classmates, faculty, and mentors. "Just listening to the dental students, ... it's not as scary as it may seem from the outside." The hands-on exercises led her to discover her artistic side. Conversations with faculty informed her about the profession and different specialties within dentistry. Meeting other students with the same goal of attending dental school made her feel less alone during the application process.

"Fundamentals of Pre-Clinical Dental Skills" Program, on the other hand, provides an opportunity for master's students in Rutgers School of Graduate Studies' Dental Track to experience RSDM.

For Abiodun Akinmoladun, a dentist trained in Nigeria, the program offered a chance to peek into the American dental education system. "'Fundamentals of Pre-Clinical Dental Skills' course is one of the highlights of being in this master's program," he said. "We had lectures in all these specialties of dentistry, even

## Glimpse into Dental School

Every summer, we host the Summer Health Professions Education Program (SHPEP) together with Rutgers New Jersey Medical School, School of Nursing, and Ernest Mario School Pharmacy. SHPEP is an innovative six-week program for first- and second-year college students. It aims to provide initial exposure to interprofessional medical leaders of tomorrow and foster diversity in the health professions.



## Back to the Mission

Every year, RSDM students and faculty go to the Black Hills of South Dakota to serve the community at the federal Indian Health Services clinic.

forensics dentistry. The program basically exposed me to all the different aspects of dentistry on an introductory level."

He also learned about cutting-edge research at the school. He met with the admissions team to learn about the application process. When a fourth-year student told him about going to the Dominican Republic for an outreach program, Akinmoladun felt excited about the possibility of going back to community service at dental school.

"All these reaffirmed my decision to want to come to RSDM," he said, planning to apply to RSDM's internationally educated DMD program this cycle.



## Third-Year Student Wins RBHS-IDEA Grant

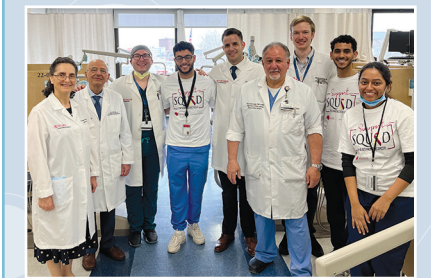
Growing up, Kinga Dabek '25 attended Polish school on Saturdays in addition to her regular classes. She learned about her culture, language, and history. She will soon return there to give back as a dental student. With the prestigious RBHS-IDEA: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Advocacy Innovation Grant, she will roll out a project that will guide her community on improving oral health and accessing dental care.

Dabek's project is called "Longitudinal Changes in Oral Health Behaviors Associated with Educational Intervention in Secondary Language Schools." She developed it with her brother, Patryk Dabek, an economics and biology double major at Yale University, and Eileen Hoskin, associate professor of professional practice and director of operative dentistry.

"Unlike other students that present to me with an idea for dentistry-related research, Kinga was never deterred and has worked on this project tirelessly for the past year," said Hoskin, Dabek's co-PI and mentor. "She is extremely smart and driven to complete what she has started."

From 200 participants, including teachers, parents, and children, at two Polish schools, the project will gather data on their oral health knowledge and brushing habits through quantitative surveys and focus groups. While collecting these, the team will teach participants how to build healthier habits and see if this educational intervention alters their brushing record. Moreover, they will investigate barriers to care and share resources with participants.

"People aren't always aware of the different programs that would be available to get low-cost health care," noted Dabek, "especially dental care, because here in



## Serving Newark

RSDM hosted an inter-professional screening event in the oral medicine clinic on April 10 for the Oral Cancer Awareness Month.

New Jersey, there are fairly good programs, but a lot of times these programs are not advertised." Consequently, many people in her community, she observed, end up having larger dental problems due to unaddressed issues.

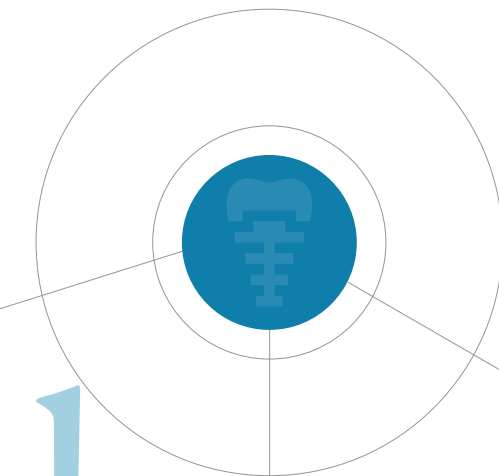
She hopes to alter that trend. "As a child of immigrants and a first-generation graduate student, doing this work to uncover barriers to dental care will highlight the gaps that I can fill as a provider in the community I grew up in," said Dabek.

She also hopes to start a dental partnership with her community that will last beyond this study and can continue through Smiles of Solidarity, a nonprofit the Dabek siblings launched at the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. "We can work as an outlet for the kids to get an insight into the different opportunities that there are in dentistry and the dental workforce," she said.

Once this grant-funded project is done, the team will pen a publication and explore implementing their pilot program in other parts of the state.

"I hope," said Dabek, "that the public health intervention being spearheaded through this study will be one of many in my career."





# Faculty

Our renowned faculty are exceptional teachers, researchers, leaders, and mentors who push our students to unlock their full potential with true commitment to the profession.

## Diagnosing Patients and Companies

Elizabeth Roberts flipped to the ads section of the American Dental Association (ADA) journal. This was pre-home-internet, and she researched each company at a nearby library. Then, she penned letters to those that might help her combine her passion for dentistry and business.

One of those letters gave her a big break.

She was hired by Prudential followed by other big names, including Deloitte, Pfizer, and Johnson and Johnson. Roberts, currently an assistant professor of diagnostic sciences at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM), has built herself a unique career merging dentistry and business.

“I was always thinking of taking my degrees forward with something more,” she said, “and keep layering on them.”

At the time of writing the letters, Roberts was a dentist for Virginia Beach and Chesapeake Health Departments, providing dental care to children in need as well as to adults with emergencies and to prison inmates. In addition, Roberts managed one of the dental clinics. “That gave me the insights and interest in taking my dental degree to the business side,” she said. She veered in that direction when her husband left the Navy, and she needed a new job.

Prudential was her first stop. She reviewed dental claims and helped launch Prudential’s dental maintenance organization. Concurrently, she received her MBA

from Rutgers and got insurance credentials, too. After Prudential, she worked for Delta Dental Plan of New Jersey’s dental maintenance organization. Then she transferred to Deloitte Consulting, helping national clients like Kaiser Permanente and Mutual of Omaha with their business problems. Later, she joined Pfizer to develop international clinical operations for big blockbuster drugs and then advanced into domestic operations. When Pfizer bought Warner-Lambert, which had oral care products like Listerine, Roberts moved to the consumer side. Then her division was acquired by Johnson & Johnson, where she worked with dental organizations like the ADA and the American Dental Education Association (ADEA). She got heavily involved with ADEA and served on its board.

As she retired from Johnson & Johnson, she learned about RSDM's "From Practice to Preceptor" program that trained professionals to work with students. "I've been using my dental degree in every aspect of treating patients as well as in business," she said. "To bring it all home into academia felt like a great match."

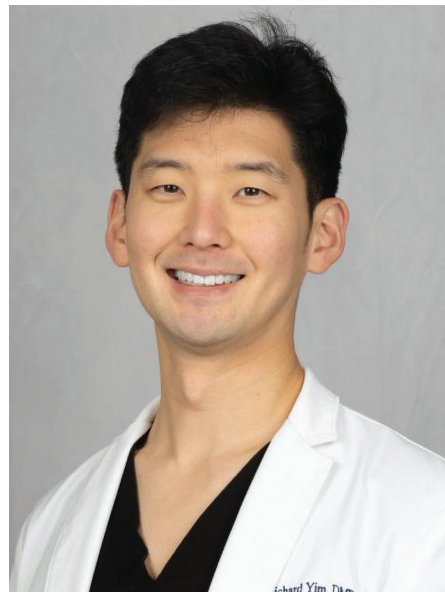
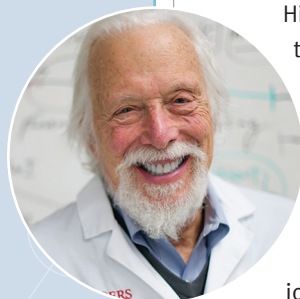
She began the program and later joined as faculty for three days a week. "Diagnostic Sciences was a great fit for me because I was teaching students how to conduct a complete examination, to interview patients, and to develop treatment plans," she said. "To me, it's the same process as solving a consulting problem; businesses are examined, analyzed, diagnosed, and treated." Besides teaching in the clinic, she gives seminars on business of dentistry and treatment plans. In addition to her Rutgers position, she maintains her consulting practice in her boutique strategy firm.

"I love diagnostic sciences," she said. "I like the challenges of it and the problem-solving context. I like seeing the aha-moments the students experience as they're starting to put it all together."

### In the Media

Chair of the Oral Biology Department Dan Fine was quoted in a *New York Times* story, "How to Keep Your Teeth Strong."

In the story, "How to take good care of your teeth as you age," the *Washington Post* featured Tomas Ballesteros, assistant professor of pediatric dentistry.



### Surgery with Impact

**R**ichard Yim's journey through the medical field took an unexpected turn when he found himself immersed in the world of oral maxillofacial surgery. It wasn't the path he had initially envisioned; early in his education, he had shadowed surgical oncology, only to realize that the harrowing life-and-death decisions of cancer surgery did not resonate with his aspirations.

"I decided that wasn't where I saw my future," Yim reflected.

His exploration eventually led him to the University of Pennsylvania, where a burgeoning interest in dentistry took hold, and within it, he discovered his calling in oral surgery. Now, as an assistant professor at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM), Yim specializes in procedures that are not only medically complex but deeply personal to his patients—none more so than facial feminization surgery.

He's working with a team of Rutgers doctors and the Rutgers Center for Transgender Health to offer this surgery more regularly.

Yim was introduced to facial feminization surgery at Walter Reed

National Medical Military Center. "We never realized how many patients were in need in the military," he observed. "It really bloomed into its own service."

This surgery is a transformative process that aligns one's appearance with their gender identity. "This is about the individual's journey to their true self," he said, articulating the profound impact of the procedure on transgender individuals. Before surgery, many patients seemed withdrawn, but the post-operation, "Their eyes are different. They're sparkling, they're gleaming, they're confident," Yim noted. He said that evidence-based studies found that facial feminization surgery significantly lowered suicidal ideations and substance abuse for the appropriate patients. Faces play such a major role in society, he explained. For many transgender patients, "every daily task is a fight with their identity and with society." And many patients experience emotional abuse and physical violence every day. "After surgery, patients would tell me, 'Yesterday was the first time I was able to do grocery shopping, and nobody looked at me,'" he recounted. "It's a life-altering event where they can go out in society, function as the gender they wish to be."

At Rutgers, his commitment to this work has not waned. He's taking significant strides in making these life-changing surgeries more accessible. His dedication also extends to technological advancements, with a keen interest in augmented reality to enhance surgical precision.

"At Walter Reed, I believe we were the first team to utilize augmented reality intra-op," he commented. "I really do think this technology is our next step as surgeons. As a specialty, it's something we must embrace, learn, and be leaders in, and hopefully, I can help Rutgers achieve that and become the forefront of new technology and innovation."



### With Public Health in Mind

**M**any people quickly realize their inclination to health care, yet it often takes much longer to figure out their exact path. The same held true for Assistant Professor of Pediatric Dentistry Mary Beth Giacona, who was drawn to pediatrics as early as in high school, majored in biology in college, but still wasn't sure about her path. After graduation, she drove cross-country and began working in biotech in the Bay area. Then, wisdom found her while getting her wisdom teeth removed.

"The oral surgeon was just so charismatic, and he was so funny and charming. It was the first time that I ever thought: what about dentistry?"

As things were back in the '90s, she researched dentistry at a public library. She noticed the profession melded her love of health care and science with arts and crafts. Soon after, she enrolled in Columbia University College of Dental Medicine and

became a pediatric dentist. Giacona's career was primarily focused on private practice, but she always kept a foot in academia through volunteering at her alma mater.

After selling her practice in 2015 and her children were grown, she wanted to put more emphasis on academia. That was when she joined Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) as a part-time faculty in 2019.

"I knew Rutgers' excellent reputation as a dental school. I actually applied for residency here, but I stayed at Columbia," she said. At RSDM, she started out with a day of teaching, but she has been gradually adding more days and hoping to reach four days this summer. "This is because of my experience once I got here; I was immediately embraced and welcomed completely into the Pediatric Department."

While at RSDM, she completed a master's in public health from Yale University

to take her career to a new phase of establishing programs that can connect dentists with community children to preserve oral health while inspiring them about dentistry.

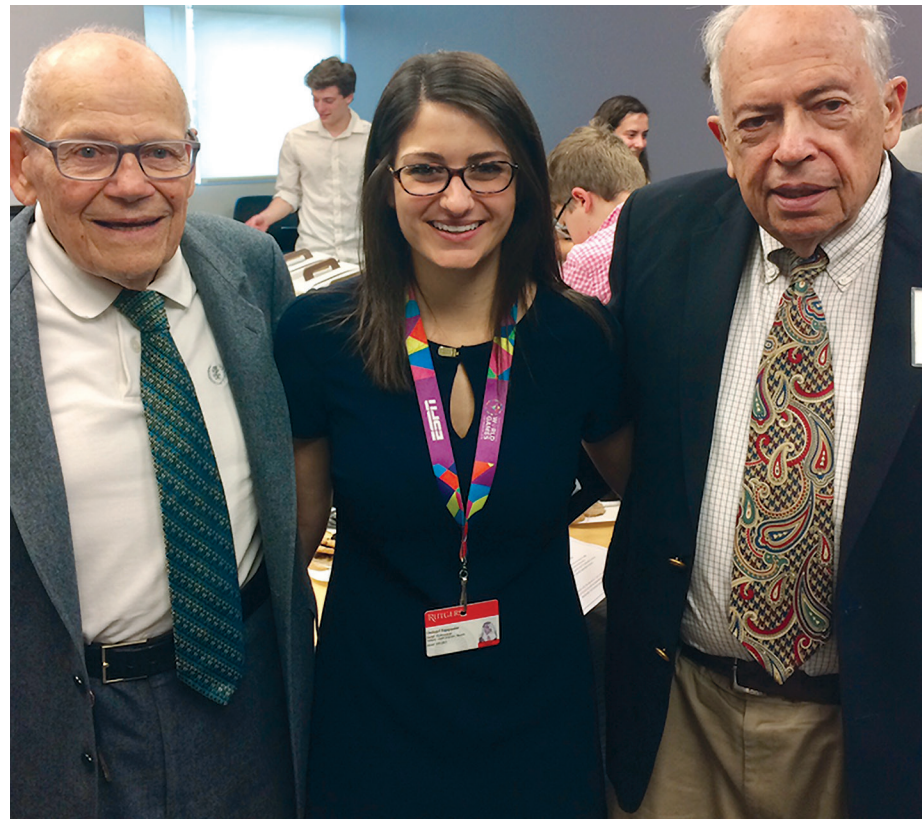
"I wanted to try to make a bigger impact with what I do and how I practice at the population level. There's so much need, and there could be such tremendous positive impact," she said. "I have this ingrained inclination to focus on children because of all my training and being a mom. And just logically, prevention is easier than restoration and has to happen in childhood."

She has been putting her new degree to use and making significant changes at RSDM. For instance, an extra credit project she did for a class during her master's led to the implementation of teaching pediatric residents how to use slow-speed handpiece prophylaxis for cleaning children's teeth. That's the expectation in private practice, she noted. "It seems like a little thing, but it was a really big, big, big deal for me."

Another big moment was when she proposed to have pediatric faculty come up with treatment plans and only channel complex ones to residents rather than having them do simple procedures that the faculty could quickly address. "It gives more opportunity to do the technical skills that you're supposed to learn in residency, more restorations, more extractions, or pulpotomies, and practicing our hand skills. And it helps to reduce the backlog." When Dean Cecile A. Feldman supported this idea, Giacona felt like she was "on cloud nine."

She is continuing to explore other ways she can get involved in the community, such as creating sealant programs at local schools.

"I've really come to appreciate when I voice opinions or suggestions for change based on that outsider perspective, they are not shut down," she said. "They are welcomed and discussed and oftentimes actually implemented."



Robert Kroll (left) with Chelsea Fosse '17, the inaugural recipient of the Justin H. Stone and Robert G. Kroll Endowed Scholarship, and Justin Stone.

practically joined at the hip,” said Stone. “We did everything together.”

The duo opened a practice together to treat people afraid of dentists. But soon, they began getting patients who needed special care treatment, stirring their practice in an unexpected direction. “Gradually, people really started to depend on us,” said Stone. “There was no one else in the northeast United States doing what we were doing .... We were also getting patients from all over the world.”

Then they transitioned from having private practice to working at St. Mary’s Hospital and then to joining RSDM.

At RSDM, students called Kroll “Doctor Whisper” because of his quiet demeanor. But to Stone, he was “Doctor Straight Arrow.” “He never compromised on anything. He required everybody, the assistants, everybody, to be above the line. Always ethical, always straight arrow,” said Stone. “He was the nicest person you’d ever meet.”

The partners never turned anyone away for lack of means and developed unique ways to treat patients. Kroll, for instance, used hypnosis on an eight-year-old patient with a ventricular septal defect and did a full mouth restoration without putting her to sleep. While others would restrain or strap frightened kids to papoose boards, the two found a compassionate way to put kids to sleep while they were hugged by their mothers. “We got a reputation for being so gentle,” said Stone. As a tribute to them and their work, to this day, dental instruments sent to sterilization from the Center are still marked “K/S.”

Atlantic Philanthropies created the Justin H. Stone and Robert G. Kroll Endowed Scholarship to recognize their efforts. The annual scholarship have benefited 16 students so far.

“We never expected anything like that,” said Stone. “I’m very proud of Bob. I miss him.”

*Justin Stone passed away shortly after this article was written.*

## A Life Dedicated to Patients with Special Health Care Needs

It was 1993. Flipping through the *Star-Ledger*, the then-dean of Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) saw a story. It was about two dentist partners, Robert Kroll and Justin Stone. And their booming operation serving patients with special health care needs at St. Mary’s Hospital was closing due to finances. The dean saw an opportunity.

“He made us an offer we couldn’t refuse,” said Stone. The duo was invited to bring their talent to RSDM and launch a clinic solely devoted to treating patients with special health care needs. In addition, they’d train students.

That laid the foundation for RSDM’s Delta Dental of New Jersey Special Care Treatment Center. “RSDM really was on the forefront with not only treating patients with special health care needs but also educating students,” said Glenn Rosivack, chair of the Pediatric Dentistry Department. The dental accreditation body,

CODA, just recently began requiring this kind of training. Rosivack added: “There is an incredible need for dental treatment for patients with special health care needs, and we receive referrals from the tri-state area. We’re one of the only sites that provides that type of treatment.” Last fiscal year, the Center provided care to 2,300 patients. While this work has been continuing, Kroll passed away on Sept. 19, 2023. He was 99.

“Bob packed considerably more than a century’s worth of living into the almost 100 years he completed,” said his obituary. Kroll was a faculty member at RSDM from 1994 to 1998. Besides being a dedicated dentist and educator, he was a pilot building a plane in his basement, an athlete, a writer, and a poet.

Born in 1924 in Paterson, NJ, Kroll obtained his dental degree from the University of Minnesota. He did a two-year general anesthesia program at Newark City Hospital, where he met Stone. The two became not only lifelong business partners but also friends. “Bob and I were

## Faculty Work Reaches Local and Global



Associate Professor of Restorative Dentistry **Hoda Yousef** delivered a presentation on implant dentistry at the Hudson County Dental Society meeting.



**Gary Heir**, director of the Center for Temporomandibular Disorders and Orofacial Pain, was a keynote speaker at the First Arab & Palestinian and Fifth Conference on Oral and Facial Pain in Jerusalem, Israel. Ghaibi Kaspo, a graduate of RSDM’s orofacial pain program, was also a speaker.

**RSDM faculty** attended the Association for Dental Education in Europe (ADEE) meeting in England. They also met colleagues from International University of Catalonia, Spain, with which RSDM has an affiliation agreement.

Assistant Professor of Clinical Affairs **John Moran** was one of the three presenters at Jewish Federations of North America’s “Aging & Trauma Strategy Meeting” conference. Moran spoke about the school’s person-centered, trauma informed care program, which equips students to better serve patients with past trauma, such as Holocaust survivors.



**Georgios Kotsakis**, professor of oral biology and assistant dean for clinical research spoke at the American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research annual meeting.





# Research

A big question, a peer's study, or a tiny detail can inspire our community to embark on new research quests that break new grounds in science and take oral health care to extraordinary heights.

## Marijuana Component Offers Opioid Alternative by Effectively Treating Dental Pain

In a groundbreaking study that could revolutionize dental pain management, Rutgers researchers have found that cannabidiol (CBD)—the non-addictive marijuana derivative—alleviates acute dental pain.

This first-of-its-kind result appears in the *Journal of Dental Research* and indicates that CBD, which produces no “high” among users, may be an equally effective but far safer alternative to addictive opioid painkillers.

“The first line of defense for dental pain has always been anti-inflammatory medications like acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin) or naproxen (Aleve), but many patients can’t take such medications or can’t get sufficient relief from them, so dentists have traditionally been among the largest prescribers of

opioid medications, either alone or in combination with these other medications,” said lead study author Vanessa Chrepa, an associate professor at the Rutgers School of Dental Medicine and director of clinical and translational research at the school’s Department of Endodontics.

“The rise in opioid-related addiction and death has everyone looking for better alternatives, things that can alleviate serious pain without hurting so many patients. Much of that research has focused on another component of cannabis called THC, but THC is psychoactive. It gets users high and has other negative effects. We studied cannabidiol or CBD because previous research from other specialties suggested that it might relieve dental pain without any psychoactive effects, which is really what everyone wants to find.”

The clinical trial involved 61 participants with severe tooth pain who were randomly assigned to receive either one of two doses of an FDA-approved pure CBD solution

called Epidiolex or a placebo. Researchers monitored patient pain levels for three hours with a visual analog scale (VAS), a standard tool for assessing pain intensity.

Both CBD groups reported substantially more pain reduction than did the placebo group. About 85 percent of CBD users reported at least a 50 percent reduction in their initial pain, and both CBD groups reached a median 70 percent reduction in pain.

Another key finding of the study was the increase in bite force among participants who received CBD, which suggests the compound improved tooth function and thus may prove particularly beneficial for those with dental pain that affects their ability to chew.

Side effects like sedation, diarrhea and abdominal pain occurred more frequently in the CBD groups than the placebo group. There were, moreover, limitations to the study, including the small sample size, and suggest that more extensive research



Assistant Professor Vanessa Chrepa at the school's oral biology laboratory.

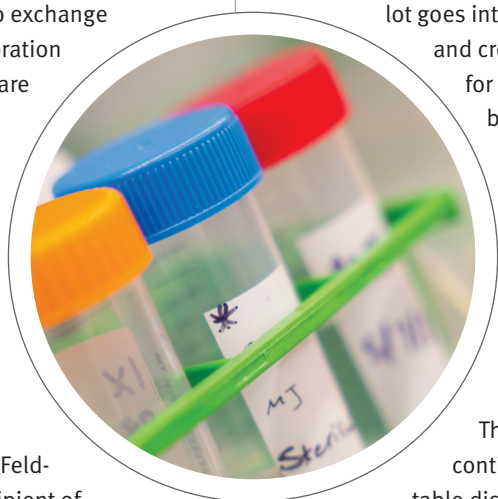
those that are just interested...I think you'll also find that it really is incredibly exciting to get involved in an activity to try to discover or create new knowledge."

Chair of the Oral Biology Department Daniel Fine and Associate Dean for Research Narayanan Ramasubbu talked about research and resources at RSDM. "If you're interested in clinical research, we can assist you in your research avenues that you might want to pursue," said Fine to the faculty. "We've outstanding geneticists, ecologists, epidemiologists, regenerative biologists, microbiology, and almost anything." The Department of Oral Biology has also been collaborating with scholars throughout Rutgers as well as external partners.

RSDM's new Director of Research Georgios Kotsakis also took the floor. "RSDM has a great reputation at a national level for clinical opioid research," he noted, and added that the school has been carrying out multiple, large-scale clinical trials. In his first month, he has met with RSDM faculty to get to know them and their work. "I found out that there's immense activity in clinical research. A

lot goes into organizing that and creating a system for collaboration, for becoming more extroverted in dissemination and presentation, and further strengthening the [school's] reputation."

The retreat continued with open table discussions led by faculty researchers.



is necessary to confirm these findings and explore the broader applications of CBD in pain management.

Plans for a larger-scale phase 3 clinical trial are underway, aiming to build on these promising results and fully elucidate CBD's safety profile for treating dental pain.

"There are more things to study with follow-up research. Can CBD be used to manage post-operative pain for patients who have undergone tooth extraction or root canal? Can we get even better pain relief by combining it with other agents like Tylenol?" Chrepa said. "That said, the results of this study are strong enough to make a compelling case to use pure CBD like Epidiolex for dental pain. A larger phase 3 trial will be the next step to get FDA approval for Epidiolex or other pure CBD solutions to use for dental pain management. I am looking forward to translating this into common practice. It will tremendously help patients with acute toothache and possibly other acute inflammatory pain conditions."

—Andrew Smith

### RSDM Hosts Its First Research Retreat

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) held its first annual Research Retreat on August 8. RSDM researchers and faculty gathered in the Oral Health Pavilion to exchange ideas, explore collaboration opportunities, and share insights.

"When you start getting involved in projects, there's this fire that gets kindled and you want to just keep seeing it grow and grow," said Dean Cecile A. Feldman in her opening remarks. Feldman has been the recipient of several research grants, including an \$11.6 million National Institutes of Health funding to study alternatives to opioids. "For those active in research right now, we know how stimulating it could be. And for

### Rutgers Health Researchers Link Tooth Loss to Increased Obesity Risk

An analysis of medical records from 1,765 older adults shows that patients with at least 21 teeth were more likely to maintain a healthy body weight than patients with fewer teeth, according to a Rutgers Health study.

Each additional missing tooth correlated with a 2 percent increase in the likelihood of obesity, and each missing pair of opposing molars correlated with a 7 percent increase in the likelihood of obesity.

"Many healthy foods, particularly raw fruits and vegetables, are hard to eat when you lack a functional dentition," said Rena Zelig, lead author of the study published in *Gerodontology*. "One possible explanation is that when people, especially older adults, are missing teeth and experience difficulty chewing, they start eating foods that are easier to eat but less healthy, like mashed potatoes, cookies, or doughnuts. These foods are typically higher in calories, fat, and sugar, resulting in weight gain."

"Dentists might be able to reduce the problem by educating patients on how to adapt healthier foods to make them easier to eat, by peeling, cutting, cooking, or blending them. Vegetables can be added to a soup or stew, and fruit can be added to a smoothie or a parfait," added Zelig, an associate professor at the Rutgers School of Health Professions.

The researchers examined data from 1,765 adults ages 65 to 89 who underwent treatment at the Rutgers School of Dental Medicine between 2016 and 2022. To analyze the relationship between the number of teeth and body mass index (BMI), they used statistical methods that adjusted for other factors that could affect BMI, such as age, gender, and existing health conditions.

Nearly 73 percent of the participants were either overweight or obese. The median number of remaining teeth was 20. That's just below the threshold of 21 needed for functional chewing, though 45 percent of participants had at least 21 teeth.



(A complete set typically has 32 teeth, including wisdom teeth.)

Unlike back teeth, which are more important for chewing, the front teeth are generally used to bite into food and didn't appear to affect weight status as significantly as the back teeth did. There was no significant connection between the number of pairs of front teeth, which are typically lost after back teeth, and BMI.

These results align with earlier studies suggesting that poor dental health is linked to weight issues. However, this study uniquely highlights the important role of back teeth in maintaining a healthy weight.

Poor dental health also has been linked to other health problems, including oral

cancer and other cancers, as well as cardiovascular disease and diabetes.

"There's a tendency to separate oral health from every other type of health, but oral health profoundly affects overall health," said Steven Singer, a co-author of the study and chair of the dental school's Department of Diagnostic Sciences. "The mouth is indeed the mirror into the rest of the body."

"Dentists are also the medical professionals that many people see most frequently, so it makes sense to have them regularly check the key biomarkers of health, like weight and blood pressure, and work with patients whose results indicate issues or refer them to other caregivers." —Andrew Smith

## Balbo Day Continues to Spotlight Student Research

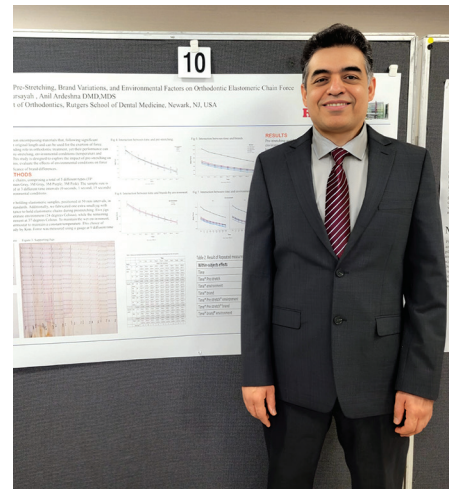
On March 27, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) hosted its annual Dr. Michael P. Balbo Dental Research Expo Day.

Named after its creator the late Michael Balbo, the full-day event is a platform for students to showcase their research, join lectures, and meet vendors. This year, 30 posters covered a broad scope of research topics in dentistry, spanning from sleep apnea to cancer to opioids to organ transplants.

Alireza Poursayah's "Effect of Pre-Stretching on the Force Decay of Orthodontic Elastomeric Chains" won him the first-place prize among pre-doctoral candidates. "Winning first place at Balbo Day was a rewarding experience that filled me with immense pride and gratitude," Poursayah said, a fourth-year DMD candidate. "The recognition was not just a personal achievement but also a demonstration of the collaborative effort and supportive environment at RSDM, which encourages students to pursue excellence."

Poursayah cultivated an interest in orthodontics for its impact on patient's health, confidence, and life quality, and what drew him into research in this specialty was his desire to contribute to the field. Through his project, mentored by Associate Professor of Orthodontics Anil Ardeshta, he said he blended theoretical knowledge with practical application. "[The] mentorship has taught me the rigors of scientific inquiry and the importance of ethical research practices, furthering my academic and professional development. This endeavor has not only allowed me to engage deeply with my passion but also enhanced my educational experience at Rutgers, providing a profound understanding of orthodontic principles and reinforcing my commitment to advancing dental care through research and innovation."

Prosthodontics resident Deven Mahesh Rawlani came in first among post-graduate presenters. His research was titled "Rehabilitation of Atrophic Maxilla



and Mandible" and mentored by Chair of the Department of Restorative Dentistry Steven Morgano. It was a case study about a 70-year-old patient who came to the school's clinic for treatment. "I was really enthusiastic to demonstrate the complex full mouth rehabilitations we perform in the Department of Prosthodontics on a daily basis and achieve life-changing results," said Rawlani. "These treatments we perform are highly evidence-based with a strong backing of literature behind them .... I am feeling a mix of excitement, pride, and gratitude."

Rawlani, always seeking answers and explanations, has tended to delve into the unknown. At RSDM, the faculty helped him transform his queries into meaningful scientific research. "As much as I enjoy clinical dentistry, performing research has changed the way I approach and decipher a complex problem," he said. He realized that research broadened his perspective and taught him to critically evaluate



Alireza Poursayah '24 (top left) won the award for pre-doctoral candidates and prosthodontics resident Deven Mahesh Rawlani (bottom right) won the first place among post-graduate presenters.

scientific literature, helping him become a better researcher and a dentist.

"I would highly encourage my RSDM peers to take advantage of opportunities like Balbo Day," he said. "It is a great event to share your work and get feedback and peer review. It has the added benefit of networking with the scientific community, boosting your confidence, enhancing your communication skills, and above all, contributing to professional development."



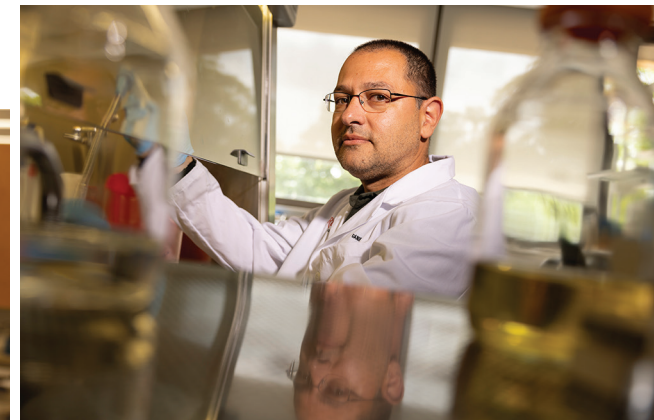
## Faculty Presents Research at First Poster Day

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) organized its inaugural "Faculty Poster Day," where faculty members had an opportunity to share their research with the community. The event held in the Oral Health Pavilion on Feb. 7, 2024, drew in students, faculty, and staff.

Associate Professor of Diagnostic Sciences Gayathri Subramanian presented her poster titled, "Exploring the Mechanisms and Utility of the Temporo-masseteric Nerve Block in Orofacial Pain" at RSDM's first "Faculty Poster Day."

"It is the first time we have this day to spark interest in research," said Maria Teresa Minaya, the program clinical coordinator at RSDM's Office of Research and the day's organizer. "Students can learn what faculty are working on, and faculty can see each other's research."

The event featured 16 posters by faculty and student researchers. The presentations spanned across dental disciplines and subjects. Vanessa Chrepa, associate professor of endodontics and director of clinical and translational research, for instance, presented her groundbreaking study that found that cannabidiol (CBD)—the non-addictive marijuana derivative—might be an effective and safer alternative to addictive opioid painkillers.



Left: Assistant Professor of Oral Biology Kabilan Velliya Gounder studies lactoferrin, a protein known for its anti-inflammatory nature, to see if it can be used to change the course of Alzheimer's disease.

Right: Associate Professor of Oral Biology Daniel E. Kadouri studies predatory bacteria for several possible uses including dental pulp infections.

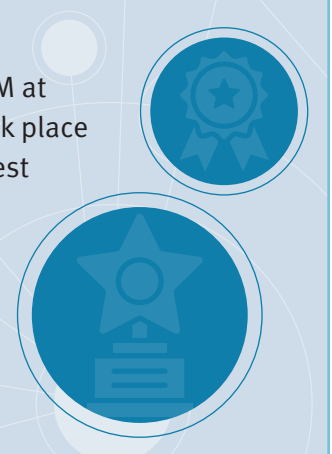
other hand, is part of a team made up of her RSDM colleague Carla Cugini and New Jersey Institute of Technology faculty that received a \$3 million National Institutes of Health grant to develop a remedy regenerating lost tooth pulp in root canals.

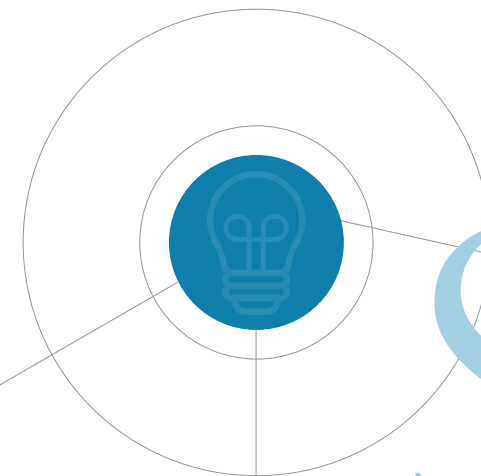
At the event, students interested in research found a chance to sign up for RSDM's Student Summer Research Program, which allows first-, second-, and third-year DMD candidates to engage in a four-week basic or clinical research project with a faculty member. The program aims to provide an opportunity for students to learn and participate in cutting-edge research that can help them understand new science and technology in dentistry and health care.

## Student Research Awarded

Tyler Jacobs and Ryan Levy represented RSDM at the Northeast Implant Symposium, which took place at Harvard University. Jacobs received the "Best Clinical Presentation" Award.

Iqra Ahmed of the Class of 2024 received the Scada/Dentsply Award for her poster presentation during the American Association for Dental, Oral, and Craniofacial Research Conference.





# Staff

Our dedicated staff make invaluable contributions to the day-to-day operations of the school with their expertise that are essential to the success of our community and patients.

## Teaming Up Nationally

**A**t three in the morning, Director of Continuing Dental Education Janice Gibbs-Reed had an idea to ensure her office's survival during the pandemic. Rather than struggling individually, what if alike offices joined powers for their programs?

She proposed this to the Association for Continuing Dental Education (ACDE) made up of about 50 American and Canadian dental schools. The association came on board, paving the way for what became the ACDE webinar series. In 2021, the series started with 31 schools contributing two volunteer faculty speakers a year to the program. The schools collectively market the webinars, and each school keeps its own revenue from its speakers. In 2023, the number of participating schools jumped to 37 and thousands of dentists from 55 countries attended the webinars.

"The fact that we're reaching this many people in all of these places is phenomenal and exciting," said Deedra Donley,

ACDE's then-president and director of continuing dental education at the University of North Carolina Adams School of Medicine.

During COVID, the series helped member schools stay connected with one another and their audiences by bringing speakers from different corners of the country when no one could travel. "It certainly has helped my office financially," Donley added. It also has been helping continuing education offices scout speakers. "The series is not to take away from the individual CE programs. It's to add to them," she said. "It's really boosting the ACDE's recognition in the public realm."

While the organization supports the series, Gibbs-Reed is the one that gets all the webinars up and running. "The series kind of became my child," said Gibbs-Reed. "It's nice to have been able to bring so many schools together and see how it's grown and manifested itself into its own little thing."

No matter the day or time of the week, Gibbs-Reed helps to kick off most of the

webinars and serves as ACDE host or co-host. At each event, she opens the floor to introductions. "People who come on are very engaged because they're taking courses that they want to take," she said. "We are grateful to the faculty who have agreed to present."

A frequent flyer in the webinar series has been Tim Gibbs from Australia. A dentist and a former senior lecturer at the University of Queensland School of Dentistry, Gibbs has taken 62 courses since the webinar series' inception.

"The lecturers in Australia have been presenting the same material for years," said Gibbs, who feels most of what he learned as a student, like gold and amalgam restorations as well as many theories, are outdated. "The ACDE lectures are of a high standard and help me to still stay up to date in a down-under Australian dental education system." Gibbs particularly enjoyed RSDM Clinical Associate Professor of Diagnostic Sciences Davis Thomas' lecture on substance abuse. "[His lecture] was about the best I have heard."

## Milestone Anniversaries Celebrated

**A** yearly tradition, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) held its Employee Recognition Event on June 19 to celebrate milestone anniversaries of faculty and staff.

Melissa A. Beards, program administrator in the Diagnostic Sciences Department, celebrated her 50 years at the school. Faculty members Professor of Periodontics Howard J. Drew and Clinical Assistant Professor of Diagnostic Services Richard A. Pertes reached 40 years at RSDM.

A new addition to the program was faculty and staff awards for contributions to the school.

Rosemarie Vaccaro, Shanette Alexander, Megen Colon, Jeremiah Colon, and Yaping Yuan received the “Excellence in Service to School” award. The team completed an enormous amount of daily data entry and worked diligently over a month when ChangeHealth, the clearing house tied to axiUm for dental and medical claims,



Top: The Excellence in Service to School awardees Jeremiah Colon (left), Megen Colon, and Yaping Yuan with Dean Cecile Feldman.

Bottom left: Carla Y. Falcon '13, the recipient of the New Jersey Health Foundation's Excellence in Teaching Award.

Bottom right: Mohammad Ali Saghiri (center), recipient of the New Jersey Health Foundation's Excellence in Research Award.

billing, and pre-authorization payment/EOBs, was hacked.

Auria “Audi” Alvarado and Loida Lopez-Olivera were recognized with the “Excellence in Service to Students” award. The duo oversees the RSDM pre-clinical simulation laboratory and builds long-lasting relationships with incoming classes from their initial days to the very last. With their warmth, compassion, and dedication, they’ve earned the name “pre-clinic moms” from students.

The New Jersey Health Foundation’s Excellence in Teaching Award was given to Carla Y. Falcon '13, associate professor and pre-doctoral program Director of Endodontics. A dedicated teacher, Falcon trains students to reach their full potential and has been bringing innovative programs, like the “Endo-Only” rotation that allows pre-doctoral students to increase their experiences in diagnosing and treating endodontic patients. She’s the founding faculty mentor for RSDM’s Endodontics

Study Club and also for the Agape Dental Society.

Assistant Professor of Restorative Dentistry and Director of Biomaterials Mohammad Ali Saghiri (Afsar) received the New Jersey Health Foundation’s Excellence in Research Award. He has secured significant funding from the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and various foundations. His latest research examined why people with diabetes are more prone to tooth decay and the study gained national attention for its finding that diabetes might weaken enamel and dentin.

## Meet RSDM Pre-clinic Moms

Every first-year student in RSDM’s traditional DMD program knows Auria “Audi” Alvarado and Loida Lopez-Olivera, or as students call them, pre-clinic moms. For their contributions to student life and success, they received the school’s “Excellence in Service to Students” this years. Get to know them through a Q&A by one of their students, Joanne Jeong '25.

### AURIA “AUDI” ALVARADO

*Tell us a bit about yourself and what you do at RSDM.*



I am a head clerk in the pre-clinical area at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine. As a head clerk, you work with all the students. Outside of Rutgers, I was also a registered dental assistant.

**How long have you been here, and why did you decide to come to RSDM?**

I’ve been here for 20 years. I’ve been in the pre-clinic for 10, and prior to that, I worked in the clinic. I was hired as a dispensary clerk.

**What do you like the most about RSDM?**

I enjoy the students. At the beginning, the first-years are sometimes scared to approach us, but I love working and interacting with them. You get to teach them more as they prepare to go upstairs to the clinic. I’ll be out on the floor all the time if Loida lets me.

**What do you enjoy doing outside the school?**

I enjoy spending time with my family. Also, in my free time and at home, I occasionally work on small projects where I like to make things out of foam paper.

**Who started calling you and Loida the “pre-clinic moms”?**

It was a class president named Serah Uddaraju of the Class of 2015. He started it at convocation, saying how he wanted to thank “our pre-clinic moms.” He said some beautiful stuff. My hair was rising; he gave me goosebumps.

### LOIDA LOPEZ-OLIVERA

*Tell us a bit about yourself.*



I am, by trade, a registered dental assistant for over 30 years. I am currently a head clerk in the pre-clinical area at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine.

**How long have you been here, and why did you decide to come to RSDM?**

In May, I just celebrated my 26 years of service at the university. I decided to join the university, which was formerly known as UMDNJ in May of 1997. There were several reasons for why I joined an educational institution after working many years in private practice like the benefits such as retirement, medical/dental benefits, and college remission for my children.

**What do you like the most about RSDM?**

It is the opportunity to work alongside dental students. Here, I have learned about different ethnicities, cultures, and faiths which has allowed me to flourish as a person. The students keep me young. Students spend more hours with me than with their own families. In a sense, we have formed our own family here. I notice when my students are upset, tired, or just need a snack. We celebrate the little wins such as a practical or big life event like a wedding.

**What do you enjoy doing outside the school?**

What I enjoy doing outside of school is spending time with my beloved husband and my two daughters. I love hiking, baking, and teaching children in Sunday school.



## Holocaust Survivor Program Recognized

**R**utgers School of Dental Medicine’s (RSDM) Holocaust Survivor Program (HSP) has won the 2023 Chancellor Team Award for “exceptional contributions ...[to] the RBHS mission.”

The Holocaust Survivor Program program was developed in partnership with the Jewish Federation of Greater MetroWest NJ and started in 2020 with a generous gift from Vice Chair and Professor of the Department of Periodontics Howard Drew '82, a son of Holocaust survivors, and his wife, Ina Drew. Holocaust survivors endured many hardships including lack of food and medical care, leaving them with a lifetime of medical problems. At RSDM, survivors have been receiving comprehensive care for various needs, ranging from root canals to extractions to dentures. To date, this program has treated 69 patients in a total of 747 patient visits.

“This is a well-deserved team recognition and an exceptional example of caring for a very special community very much in need of our care,” said Cecile A. Feldman in her recommendation letter.

The HSP team includes Drew, Chief Operating Officer Andrea West, Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs Michael Conte, Assistant Professor of Diagnostic Sciences John Moran, Dental Comprehensive Care Coordinator Carolina Vega, and Patient Representative Tayri Leon.





# Patient Care

What sets apart an RSDM education is its rigorous clinical education that benefits our students as clinicians but also serves our local community, making us the largest oral health care provider in New Jersey.

## Father-Son Veterans Come to RSDM for Care

On any given day, 323 miles is a substantial distance. Yet, it's one Anthony DelVecchio is willing to drive just to bring his father to Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) for an appointment through the Vet Smiles program.

"It is worth so much that I go from Wayne to Whiting to Newark to Whiting to Wayne," said DelVecchio, a 58-year-old veteran living in Wayne, NJ. His father, a Korean veteran, lives in Whiting, NJ.

Both DelVecchio and his father are in RSDM's Vet Smiles program established in 2022 with generous donations from Delta Dental and HealthCare Foundation of New Jersey. The program provides complimentary dental treatment to eligible veterans for their service. In its first month, the program had 74 patients enrolled. Now, there are over 90 patients actively receiving treatment.

DelVecchio joined the Air Force at 19. He served for almost eight years and had two honorable discharges. He was based in Texas, Ohio, and New Jersey. With the Reserves, he served during Operation Desert Storm in 1991, working long hours on the flight line at home to help transport equipment, troops, and supplies overseas.

He learned about RSDM's Vet Smiles program through the Passaic County Veterans Administration. "I was actively looking for a dentist because I was in pain," he said.

His dental journey started with extractions that relieved his pain. To date, he has had 23 appointments, including surgeries, implant work, and sinus lift. He also had his teeth cleaned during which he fell asleep.

"Who falls asleep at the dentist?" he asked rhetorically. "This is how relaxed and comfortable I feel here with the dentists that take care of me. It's just amazing service that you get. I'm never going to

stop coming here, whether or not the VETSmile program is still intact."

He told his father Pasquale DelVecchio about the program, who also was looking for a dentist and getting estimates that made him "almost drop dead," he said. "[Vet Smiles] came as a blessing."

Pasquale DelVecchio served in the Korean War for 16 months. "I was one of the blessed because there's people that didn't make it," said the 85-year-old. "It's a terrible thing with all wars."

He has had 11 visits so far. He mostly had cleaning and restorative work such as fillings. "Teeth are very, very important," he said. "I'm such a foodie, and I need all my teeth."

From the front desk to doctors, all his experiences at the school have been positive. His student doctor, Olajide Akeju of Class of 2024 "is phenomenal," he said. "I'm so impressed with this place; I would recommend it to anybody."



## Smiles All Around

On the first Friday in February, the face of Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) changed for the annual Give Kids a Smile Day. That morning, students turned the school into a vibrant playground with decorations and activity stations for things like face painting and dental games. They dressed up in tooth fairy and toothpaste costumes. A magician set up a show.

“When we pulled up in the bus, the students and staff were cheering children on, like celebrities, high-fiving them, and singing,” said Bernadette Boyd-Jenkins, a pre-K teacher at Sarah Ward Nursery, where she teaches four-year-olds. “It was like a party for them. They enjoyed being entertained.”



Give Kids a Smile is a nationwide effort started by the American Dental Association Foundation to deliver free oral health care to underserved children in February, National Children’s Dental Health Month. Approximately 80 children from Newark Educators and Sarah Ward Nursery came to RSDM for a free dental screening and fun day made possible by RSDM staff, faculty, and about 60 student volunteers.

The student organizer this year was Tishana Foster ’25, the president of the American Academy Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) Club at RSDM, eyeing to pursue a pediatric dentistry specialty after graduation. Since the summer, she worked closely with the Pediatric Dentistry Department’s Clinical Services Supervisor Maria LaBoy, who orchestrates the event, and the AAPD Club leaders. Foster helped with everything from connecting with schools to coordinating student volunteers to planning activities.

“It made me step out of my comfort zone, really showed me how much of a leader I could be, and gave me confidence,” she said. “If you put your mind to it and have a good community around you, things can happen.”

During the event, she saw first-hand the influence she could have on children as a dentist. She recounted the experience of a little girl who first cried from fear of the dentist and then for not wanting to leave the school. “It showed me that delivery is really important in dentistry and how you can easily just change a child’s perception by bringing some form of familiarity or fun,” said Foster.

“It was a very enjoyable experience just to see the kids smiling and enjoying themselves actually going to the dentist because most kids are afraid,” said Shakira Jarrett, a substitute teacher at Sarah Ward. “It was more than just a free dental screening. It was a very well-put-together, fun-filled event for them that made children feel comfortable. The staff were very, very welcoming, had a lot of patience and energy.” Jarrett herself also had a great time.

Boyd-Jenkins noted that none of her students cried and loved all the activities and receiving gift bags with toothpaste and toothbrushes. “This day motivated the kids because they were in the spotlight,” she said. “It was all about them.”

## Through Thick and Thin

In excruciating pain or for regular check-ups, Alessandra Esteves has chosen Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) for her care since 2002.

“I don’t go anywhere else,” said Esteves, who is originally from Brazil but has been a long-time Newarker. “I don’t trust nobody else with my mouth.”

In the past two decades, Esteves has received care through RSDM’s Ryan White Program, which provides comprehensive dental care to persons living with HIV. Esteves contracted the disease when her former boyfriend sexually assaulted her after hearing her decision to leave him. That day, he also severely beat her up and

broke one of her teeth inside the gum. That tooth later got infected. Her dentist at the time told her to see a specialist and recommended RSDM for its expertise as well as its Ryan White Program.

“[Everyone at the school] were very careful with me. You guys treated me like a baby, always compassionate with me,” she said.

After taking care of the infection, she continued to turn to RSDM for her oral health care. Like that time when she was bit on her lower lip by a client’s dog while pet-sitting. Or when her bridge suddenly broke over the weekend. She also had crowns and fillings and now comes in every six months for her regular checkups. “My mom always made sure that we get the cleaning every year, so I got into the habit of going to the dentist for prevention,” she said. “I always try to stay on top of it.”

With each visit, she met a growing number of RSDM staff as well as faculty and student doctors. She bonded with Veronica Andrade, supervisor of patient services, over their love for dogs. Esteves still fondly remembers Juliana Gomes, a student in the internationally educated DMD program who became faculty. “She took care of me for many years. She would touch my mouth and I wouldn’t even know it,” she said. “All the students have been great. Even the teacher there already knows me for many years and tells the students, ‘Take care of her.’ They are really nice to me. I love it.”



## Ryan White Program Receives Further Support

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 treats Ryan White patients both at the school clinics in Newark and at the Community Oriented Dental Education (CODE) program sites.



## RSDM Increases Clinic Capacity

With a recent change in operations and curriculum, Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) has increased the pre-doctoral students’ available time in the student clinics, where third and fourth years provide dental care under the supervision of faculty who are licensed dentists.

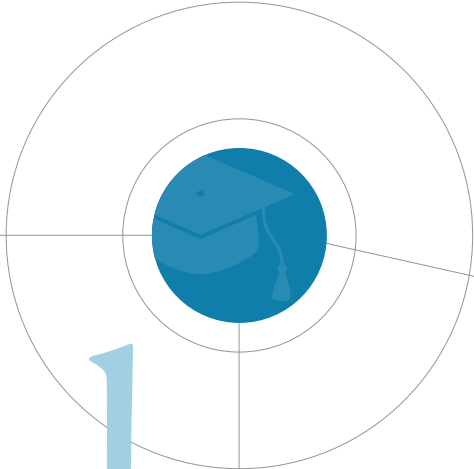
“It gives the students more opportunity and experience in these clinics,” said Michael Conte, senior associate dean for clinical affairs, “and the more patients they see, the better dentists they will be.”

Although pre-doctoral candidates have always been in the clinic five days a week, they only saw their family of patients at the student clinics for four days with a fifth day traditionally dedicated to rotation in specific areas such as oral surgery, pediatrics, urgent care/emergency, and radiology. Now, these experiences are on a rotating schedule rather than being anchored on a single day. This allows students to see patients at the pre-doctoral clinic on any weekday.

This flexibility in the students’ schedules will also benefit RSDM patients.

“We now have more chairs open so we can get more patients in every session,” said Natalie Scarpa-Lota, assistant dean for clinical affairs. “We’re trying to increase access to care.”

Clinics are open Monday through Friday from 8 am to 5 pm. In addition to student clinics, RSDM has graduate specialty clinics, a special care center, and two faculty practices along with community clinics.



# Alumni

Our alumni build an enduring relationship with our institution and develop lifelong commitment to its values that promotes excellence in the profession, mentorship, and giving back.

## RSDM Voice at the Table

**R**utgers Board of Trustees has 41 voting members. One of those voices for the first time belongs to a Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) alum, Yanique Le-Cadre.

“When I was appointed, I recognized the importance of keeping our institution strong,” said Le-Cadre ’93’00, “and the work that needs to be done to plan for the futures of our students.”

An orthodontist, Le-Cadre was selected as a charter trustee in 2020 for a six-year term. In her role, she is involved in making decisions about University’s conduct, management, and administration. She also serves on committees. Along the way, she works closely with RSDM administration.

“Returning to Rutgers has just been a wonderful homecoming for me,” Le-Cadre said. “I enjoy this role more than I thought I would; the Rutgers community and people on the board are phenomenal.”

Born and raised in New York, Le-Cadre attended Brooklyn Technical High School,

which specialized in sciences. She went to Wesleyan University and was on the pre-med track. Spending time at hospitals, she realized it wasn’t a good fit. That was when she looked another way and noticed her braces. “Being an orthodontic patient, I really fell in love with the profession,” she said.

She enrolled in RSDM. She believed the school had a strong clinical component and a diverse student body. She and her classmates became a close-knit cohort. “When we get back together, it’s like we never left.” As soon as she graduated, she saw the strength of her education. “When I did my general practice residency (GPR) [at the Long Island College Hospital], I could extract any tooth whereas those from other schools didn’t get that same foundation.”

After her GPR, she practiced as a general dentist for a few years. However, she still had her heart set on orthodontics, leading her back to RSDM for her master’s degree. “It was just a phenomenal experience” with small class sizes, dedicated faculty,

and a wide range of cases.

Now, with 30 years in the profession, she started to look for ways to give back. She became the president of the New York State Society of Orthodontists. In addition to owning a private practice in New Rochelle, NY, Le-Cadre recently began teaching as a clinical instructor at the NYU College of Dentistry Department of Orthodontics. “I enjoy working with students because they bring new, fresh energy,” she said. She pulls from her RSDM experiences in the classroom like the many clinical pearls and techniques that Assistant Professor of Orthodontics Jeffrey Cooper taught her as a post-graduate student.

When she came to visit RSDM as a trustee, “It was such a gift to see and thank some of the faculty members like Drs. Cooper, Fenesy, and Samant, who really made a difference in my professional journey,” she said. “I think sometimes the professors may not know their work is really touching someone, but it does. I hope I can also do that for a student along the way.”



Sniscak (right) at the Academy of General Dentistry Convocation in 2019.

### Using Dental Degree for Greater Good

The repercussions of the 2008 recession were still very much felt when Thomas Sniscak '10 entered the workforce. Looking for opportunities, he saw a position at a county jail.

"Nobody really thinks about graduating dental school and working at a jail," he said. "I figured I'd give it a try, and it turned out I really loved it."

Thirteen years later, he's still working one day a week at the Ocean County Jail. But this is only one of the many ways Sniscak, who owns a practice in Belmar, NJ, has been using his dental degree to positively impact his community.

Like many, Sniscak knew he wanted to go into health care unsure of a specialty. As an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University, he started dipping his toes into different health care professions. He found this passion when he attended Rutgers School of Dental Medicine's (RSDM) Gateway to Dentistry Program and got a taste of dental school.

"It was really huge getting to see the clinic, and the faculty were very warm to us as college students." His program mentor became a lifelong friend.

Sniscak matriculated into RSDM in 2006. He was recognized for his academic achievements and inducted into the national dental society, Omicron Kappa Upsilon (OKU). He became the class president and "became more comfortable with public speaking and leadership, which translated to taking a more active role when I left dental school."

He became the chair of New Jersey Dental Association's New Dentists Committee for several years. He later became one of the youngest presidents of the Monmouth-Ocean County Dental Society. He is currently a representative of American Dental Association's Council on Membership.

His career, on the other hand, began with a general practice residency at the Jersey Shore University Medical Center and led him to become the hospital's first on-call general dentist. "It was a big honor," said Sniscak. He still holds that role and is active in the residency program.

He also continues his work at the Ocean County jail. "The need is tremendous," he said. "I'm seeing people in their early 20s that have never seen a dentist before." He also sees a lot of patients suffering from addictions. "[They] don't recognize themselves when they look in the mirror," he said. "Dentistry plays an important role in removing scars of their past lives and helps their recovery."

Moreover, Sniscak has been volunteering with the New Jersey Dental Lifeline Network, which provides dental care to the elderly with limited means. Last year, he joined the organization's board, too.

"[Giving back] is really important to me," he said. "I'm trying to get more people inspired to that as well."

### Velazquez '99 Takes the Helm at NJDA

Our alumna Elisa Velazquez '99 has become the 155th President of the New Jersey Dental Association (NJDA). She has been involved with organized dentistry to promote equality and inclusion in the workforce, and increase access to care. She started a New Jersey chapter of the national Hispanic Dental Association, was the president of the New Jersey Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, and served as the treasurer for the NJDA prior to becoming the organization's president.



### Mentorship Event Gives Real-Life Insights to Students

Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM) Alumni Association and the New Jersey Dental Association (NJDA) organized their first joint mentorship event on March 21.

"Mentorship is an important principle for the NJDA and the [RSDM] Alumni Association," said Donald Lapine, the president of the RSDM Alumni Association and assistant professor of restorative dentistry. "It is an important process of growth personally and professionally."

Said then-NJDA President Renee M. Arace, "NJDA was extremely excited to partner with RSDM for this first-ever mentorship event. We have many resources and mentorship opportunities available to assist these dental students in making their transition as a dental professional entering the workforce and community."

The event featured a panel discussion followed by a Q&A and one-on-one discussions between students and mentors. Throughout the event, the students had the opportunity to ask questions on a variety of topics ranging from private practice

to student loan repayment to specialties to post-graduate education.

Orthodontist Kathleen Hargaden '91'94 joined the event as a mentor, thinking her experience as a practicing clinician could be helpful to students. "Explaining the realities of practicing and engaging with patients is something that is not easily taught in dental school," she said and added: "Being honest and open with students, explaining to them what real life is going to be like, is so important." Hargaden received her DMD and orthodontic certificate from RSDM along with an MS in oral biology from Rutgers School of Biomedical Sciences. "I am very happy I attended the event," she said and to have met students and recent grads.

Eleanor Reynolds of the Class of 2024 attended the event, seeking answers to her questions as she prepares to head into a pediatric dentistry residency at Saint Joseph's Hospital in Paterson, NJ. "I'm very excited about that but it's quite terrifying," she said. "[The event] was really good for me because there were a few pediatric dentists, so I was able to have one-on-one conversations with them. They really explained to us what real-life dentistry is like ... [The event] was very informative and interactive."

Originally from Jamaica, Reynolds is in the internationally educated DMD program. She fell in love with pediatric dentistry as a dental student back home, and her love solidified at RSDM as she learned more about the wider applications of pediatric dentistry. "I feel the most fulfilled when I'm seeing kids."

The event helped her feel more comfortable with her decision to go into residency. "I'm now more aware of what to expect when I graduate. Before, I thought that jobs available for someone like me [an international student] were far and few between. But now I know that there are a lot more opportunities available," Reynolds said. "I'm very, very fortunate to be in this position at Rutgers and have all this exposure. Honestly, sometimes I have to pinch myself."

### Keeping in Touch

Early in his life, Roger Johansen '84 saw the importance of building connections. For instance, his photography teacher at Rutgers inspired him to go into dentistry. In another case, he started teaching at Rutgers School of Dental Medicine (RSDM), when his faculty mentor recruited him upon graduation. His students as well as classmates became lifelong friends and colleagues.

"If you look at partnerships, jobs, and things like that, a lot of people who meet in dental school stay together for the rest of their careers," he said. "Dental school relationships are very important."

Johansen just celebrated his 40th anniversary with his classmates and has been strengthening these relationships through the RSDM Alumni Association.

Following this undergraduate training at Rutgers, he began the DMD and prosthodontics specialty programs. Then-Prosthodontics Chair and Professor Emeritus William Cinotti approached Johansen to join the faculty. Johansen began teaching full-time while practicing privately. He got involved in the school from serving as an admissions committee member to chairman of the admissions committees to the president of the Alumni Association.

"I was always in the Alumni Association," said Johansen, for its social aspect of fostering relationships, mentoring, and giving back. "The school needs people to be involved. We can build our school and not just forget what it's done for us, allowing us to have this career."



Johansen (center) with classmates Robert Braun '84 (left) and Jeffrey Hall '84 (right) at the 2024 Alumni Reunion.

# Donors

We thank our generous donors who have given back to the school for so many years. The list reflects donations from **July 1, 2023, to June 30, 2024.**

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Robert Montemurno, DMD, and Cheryl Byk Montemurno, MD

## 24 YEARS

Charles M. Krowicki, DMD, and Sallyanne Bonner, DMD  
David B. Nardini, DMD  
Joel N. Pascuzzi, DMD  
James A. Sciarretta, DMD

## 23 YEARS

Frank A. Catalanotto, DMD, and Jane Catalanotto  
Valerie C. Rico, DMD, and John C. Maglione  
Thomas M. Scorziello, DMD

## 22 YEARS

Cecile A. Feldman-Zohn, DMD, MBA, and Harry K. Zohn, DMD  
Mitchell J. Gardiner, DMD, and Deborah Lowe Gardiner  
Robert A. Shekitka, DMD, and Eda Shekitka

## 21 YEARS

Pamela L. Alberto, DMD  
Shalin P. Jani, DMD  
Elmer A. Villalon, DMD, and Sharon Villalon  
Ira J. Zohn, DMD

## 20 YEARS

Marc P. Gimbel, DMD, and Melanie L. Gimbel  
David A. Goldberg, DMD, and Cynthia K. Scott, PhD  
Nobel Biocare USA, LLC  
Vincent B. Ziccardi, DDS, MD, FACS, and Nicea J. D'Annunzio

## 19 YEARS

KLS Martin, LP  
Paul J. Lawyer, DMD, and Noelle Lawyer  
Jeffrey C. Linfante, DMD  
New Jersey Dental Association  
Kenneth P. Press, DMD, and Susan H. Press, DDS  
Christopher J. Wahlers, DMD

## 18 YEARS

Andrew I. Brafman, DMD  
Torin W. Rutner, DMD, MD, and Juliet Rutner

## 17 YEARS

Fraya I. Karsh, DMD  
Joel Martin, DDS  
Andrea C. West, MBA, and Ronald E. West

## 16 YEARS

AMB Foundation  
Janice Gibbs-Reed  
Narpat S. Jain, DMD, FAGD, and Archana Jain  
George J. Schmidt, Jr., DMD

## 15 YEARS

Lisa M. Latella, DMD  
Allison B. Loeb, DMD  
Ryan C. Maher, DMD, and Jennifer Maher

## 14 YEARS

Richard D. Bloomstein, DDS  
Philip J. Render, DMD, USA (Ret.), and Angela Render

## 13 YEARS

Robert Neal Goldsmith, DMD  
Michael A. Steinle, DMD  
Straumann USA  
George K. Thomas, DMD  
Patricia A. Tordik, DMD, and Michael A. Steinle, DMD  
Elisa J. Velazquez, DMD

## 12 YEARS

Joshua Zak Epstein, DMD, and Sima Yakoby Epstein, DMD  
Joseph S. Leibovici, DMD, and Liat Moore-Leibovici, DMD  
Edward S. Orenstein, DMD, and Cheryl H. Orenstein, DMD  
Narayanan Ramasubbu, PhD  
Helen Schreiner, PhD, and Joseph Brennan  
ZimVie

## 11 YEARS

Alice Chao, DDS, MPH, and Samuel Y. Quek, DMD, MPH  
Brian G. DePetris, DMD  
The Healthcare Foundation of New Jersey

Jon W. Jenson, DDS  
Roger Edmund Johansen, DMD  
Brett D. Juliano, DMD  
New Jersey Health Foundation  
John R. Nosti, DMD, and Tara Nosti  
Charles H. Perle, DMD, and Esta Perle  
Hua Zhu, PhD, DMD, and Xin Zhang

## 10 YEARS

Cibele Nasri-Heir, DMD, MSD  
Neoss, Inc.  
Steven R. Singer, DDS, and Sharon Singer  
Lawrence B. Wang, DDS, and Jenny Wang, DDS

## 9 YEARS

Doris Cinotti  
James D. Derose and Elizabeth A. Derose  
Chelsea Fosse, DMD, and Alexander S. Fisher, DMD  
Miriam T. Furlong, DMD  
Ryan Keith Graver, DMD  
Robert Laski, DMD, and Michele Sanzo-Laski, DMD  
Joan C. Liljegen  
Cathy A. Massa, DMD, and Thomas V. Massa, DMD  
Emily H. Sabato, EdD  
Ellen M. Simmons-Shamrell, DMD, and Richard Shamrell  
James F. Skiba, DDS  
Salwan Yousif, DMD

## 8 YEARS

Fabio G. Apolito, DMD, and Rose Apolito  
Monika A. Barakat, DMD, and Mark Barakat, MD  
Daniel J. Chertoff, DDS  
Eduardo Garita, DMD  
J.P. Morgan Charitable Giving Fund  
Donald Lapine, DMD  
Steven M. Morgano, DMD  
Stephanie Novak and James C. Stekas  
Laura A. Teti

## 7 YEARS

Thomas J. Cangialosi, DDS  
Sophia Chadda, DDS, and Konstantine Trichas, DDS  
Daniel H. Fine, DMD  
Janine Fredericks-Younger, DMD  
Nathalie A. Scarpa-Lota, DMD, and Christopher C. Lota, DMD  
Carol A. Speranza  
Philip H. Wolfson, DMD, and Inge Poppenburg-Wolfson  
Amanda Yee, DMD

## 6 YEARS

Noah Chivian, DDS, and Marjorie Gale  
Dale U. Cox, Jr., DMD  
Ann Cheng Fu  
Kathleen M. Hargaden, DMD, MS  
Wei-Hsin Men, DDS  
Thomas M. Panitch, DDS, and Geraldine Panitch  
Gail P. Petrosky, DMD  
Gary M. Prisdand, DMD

Charles J. Rose, DMD  
Schwab Fund for Charitable Giving  
Anthony T. Suriano, DMD

## 5 YEARS

Joseph Brennan  
Chen-Men East Broadway Dental Center, LLP  
Daniel Collinson  
Daniel M. Di Cesare, DMD, and Michelle R. Di Cesare  
Ellen M. Didimamoff-Thomas, MD, and George K. Thomas, DMD  
Kevin J. Lake, DMD  
Wai Wah Mahr  
Preethi R. Nair, DMD, and Anil Nair, MD  
Ocean Pediatric Orthodontic Associates

## 4 YEARS

DSX Dental Solutions & Technology  
Michael Patrick Ennis and Jean Ennis  
Michael Harris Moskowitz, DMD  
John M. Murray, DMD  
Oswals Real Estate Holdings, LLC  
Herminio L. Perez, DMD, MBA  
Rosemichele A. Sorvino-Macchia, DMD

## 3 YEARS

Acadental, Inc.  
David Christensen, DMD  
Marianne Cifelli, DMD  
Catherine Deehan and Michael Deehan, MD  
Sufian Mahmoud, DMD  
Ann-Marie K. McDade and James McDade, II  
Nina O'Connell, DMD  
Gregory J. Rosen, DMD  
Ryan P. Scally, DMD  
Allison Striano, DMD  
The American Academy of Periodontology Foundation  
Konstantine Trichas, DDS  
Thomas J. Viccaro, DMD

## 2 YEARS

Align Technology, Inc.  
Allergan Aesthetics  
Maria G. Ambrosio, DMD, and William Maldonado, DMD  
Latoya Carroo  
Patricia G. DeSalvo, DMD, and Mark DeSalvo  
Dominion National  
David Goteiner, DDS  
Wei Huang, DMD, PhD  
Komet USA, LLC  
Samantha Konner  
Cary H. Leizer, DMD  
Maria Marrison  
Padma Mayukh Mukherjee, DMD  
Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Foundation  
Peter Michael Paradiso, DMD, and Karina Paradiso  
Jill S. Paulson  
Eric A. Reitmeyer, DMD  
Susan Rider, DDS  
Thomas J. Sniscak, DMD, and Joan Sniscak  
The Advanced Dental Center of Cedar Knolls  
James M. Wiener, DMD  
World Of Smiles, Inc.  
Flora Yang Quek

## WE VALUE AND WELCOME ALL OF OUR NEW DONORS!

Oluwatobi Taiwo Akangbe  
Tom Angle and Lydia Angle  
Terence B. Bodak, Jr.  
Robert J. Braun, DMD, and Janet Topfer Braun  
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Carolyn Bristol-Martin  
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Croatian Fraternal Union of America, Lodge 760  
Betsy Darivoff  
Donald R. Delauter  
Susan DeMatteo  
Dentist Job Connect  
Karim Elmorshedy, DMD  
Anita M. Emery  
Howard W. Ensel, DDS  
Andrew Fallek and Lainey Fallek  
Edward J. Feins, DMD  
Louise Firestone  
Natalie Fishman  
Jerome S. Forman, DDS, and Diane G. Forman  
Foundation of Endodontics  
John Fournier and Carolyn Fournier  
Rick Fry and Greer Fry  
Charlene Gambino, DMD  
Anna M. Gazu, DMD  
Jaime Gibbs  
Gordon Goldsmith  
Benjamin Good  
Jay Lawrence Greenfield, DMD  
Jeffrey J. Hall, DMD, and Angela L. Hall, PsyD  
Alice Healand  
Nancy C. Jacobs  
Richan Jirel  
Kids Dental Brands  
Haleh H. Kossari, DMD  
Georgios Kotsakis, DDS  
Peggy Levitan

Mahesh Batukbhai Limbani, DMD  
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Joan Neugeborn  
Karen Howard Oconefsky  
Marci Oconefsky  
Shawn Paciotti  
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Paul Edwards Dental Studio, LLC  
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Marshall S. Pollack, MD  
Ken Pomeroy  
Barbara A. Ramsden, DMD  
Betsy N. Robinson  
Kiera Anne Rosen, DMD  
Jelena Rudela  
Stefanie L. Russell, DDS, MPH, PhD  
Michelle San Fillipo  
Cynthia K. Scott, PhD  
Ellen L. Shapiro  
Gary Shapiro  
Anjila Shresea  
Susan Sokolov  
Stellalife  
Jason A. Tambor, DMD  
Kathy Udell-Martin, DDS  
Union City Oral Surgery Group  
US-Israel Binational Science Foundation  
Lauren Volper  
Hal Wasserman  
Melanie White  
Dean Winslow  
Talia Wood, DMD  
Zeeshan Zahid  
Judi Zivic

## Donors Meet Scholars

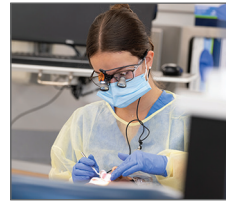
Our supporters and students came together at the RSDM Annual Donor/Scholar Dinner. In 2023, 65 students were awarded 48 scholarships, **four of which were newly established.** The new scholarships are Eileen R. Hoskin, DMD, and Craig S. Hirschberg, DDS, Endowed Scholarship; Drs. Shanti, Kanti, Subhash Jain, and Sarla Jain Endowed Scholarship; Valerie C. Rico, DMD, and John C. Maglione Endowed Scholarship; and Elisa J. Velazquez, DMD, and Miriam T. Furlong, DMD, Endowed Scholarship.

Scan the QR code to support RSDM students today or contact Joan Liljegen at 862-377-4813.



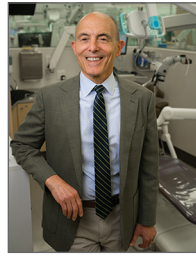
## JANUARY

This year, 46 students from the Class of 2023 sought placement through the national post-graduate dental program, and **95 percent** of them have been successfully matched. The 2023 national match rate is 66 percent, placing RSDM about 30 percent above the average.



## APRIL

Chair of the Department of Endodontics **Craig S. Hirschberg** was elected as the president of American Association of Endodontists, which represents specialty endodontics in North America.



## JULY

Clinical Assistant Professor of Restorative Dentistry **Michele Schultz** was elected as the president of the American Friends of Dental Volunteers for Israel, the only health care facility in Israel where foreign dentists can volunteer to treat underserved/vulnerable populations.



## THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

## OCTOBER

RSDM's **Holocaust Survivors Program** was featured in a *Times of Israel*'s story, "Holocaust survivors school young dentists on 'trauma-informed' care in New Jersey."

## MAY

The **Class of 2026** and the internationally educated dentists in **Classes of 2024 and 2025** wore their white coats for the first time in a ceremony at RSDM.



**One hundred and fifty-five students** moved tassels to left on the May 15 **Convocation**, earning Doctor of Dental Medicine (DMD) and post-graduate degrees.



## AUGUST

Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Diversity & Inclusion **Herminio Perez** was awarded the Excellence in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Award "for significant contributions to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in teaching, scholarship, or service including clinical care at RBHS."



## NOVEMBER

Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs **Michael Conte** was appointed as the new president of the DALE Foundation Board of Directors.



## FEBRUARY

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



## SEPTEMBER

Professor of Diagnostic Sciences **Mahnaz Fatahzadeh** was appointed to the American Board of Oral Medicine, named as the chair of the Organization for Teachers of Oral Diagnosis, and became the newest president of the Essex County Dental Society for 2023-24.



## DECEMBER

Assistant Dean for Extramural Clinics **Jill York's** proposal was selected for the Trauma and Tobacco Community of Practice (CoP) sponsored by the National Council for Mental Wellbeing. The CoP will run at RSDM extramural clinics from Jan. to June 2024 by York along with Shawn Kelly, Cynthia Jetter, and Lisa Ruble.



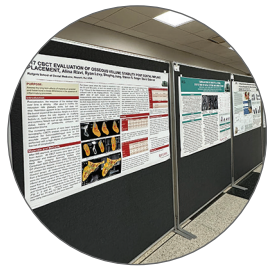
## JUNE

Professor of Diagnostic Sciences **Carmine LoMonaco** (right) received New Jersey Dental Association's Theodore V. Symanski Lifetime Achievement Award from the organization's president Peter DeSciscio '85.



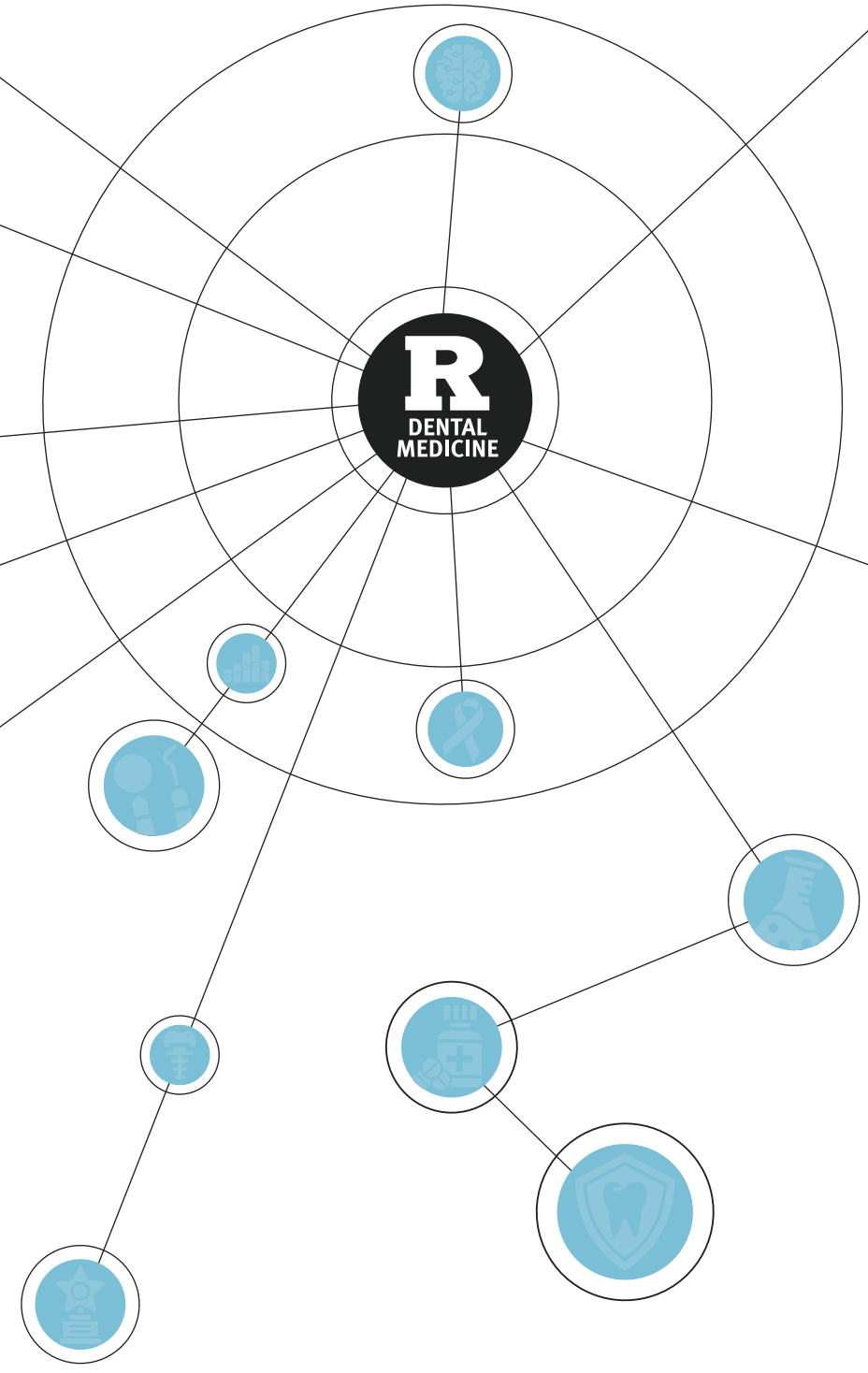
## MARCH

Started by and named after Michael Balbo, 2023 **Balbo Research Day** featured 38 posters. Zhi Chao Feng '23 won first place for pre-doctoral students. Orofacial pain resident Hemamalini Chandrashekhar came first among the post-graduate presenters.

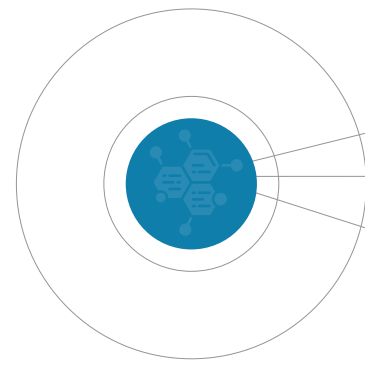


# Timeline

# 2023



# Administration



**Steven Singer, DDS**

Chair, Department of Diagnostic Sciences

**Herminio L. Perez, DMD, MBA, EdD**

Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Diversity & Inclusion

**Travis Gant, MS**

Director of Information Systems & Technology

**Kim Fenesy, DMD**

Vice Dean

**Craig Hirschberg, DDS**

Chair, Department of Endodontics

**Jill York, DDS, MAS**

Assistant Dean for Extramural Clinics

**Andrew Sullivan, DDS**

Chair, Department of Periodontics

**Georgios A. Kotsakis, DDS, MS**

Assistant Dean for Clinical Research and Director of Research

**Vincent Ziccardi, DDS, MD**

Chair, Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery

**Andrea West, MBA**

Chief Operating Officer

**Daniel Fine, DMD**

Chair, Department of Oral Biology

**Cecile A. Feldman, DMD, MBA**

Dean and Distinguished Professor

**Janine Fredericks-Younger, DMD**

Associate Dean for Graduate Programs

**Narayanan Ramasubbu, PhD**

Associate Dean for Research

**Nathalie Scarpa-Lota, DMD**

Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs

**Michael Conte, DMD, MPH**

Senior Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs

**Steven Morgano, DMD**

Chair, Department of Restorative Dentistry

**Joan Liljegren, MEd**

Director of Development

**R. Glenn Rosivack, DMD**

Chair, Department of Pediatric Dentistry and Community Health

**Rosa Chaviano-Moran, DMD**

Associate Dean for Admissions

**Emily Sabato, EdD**

Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

**Vincent Nacco**

Chief Financial Officer

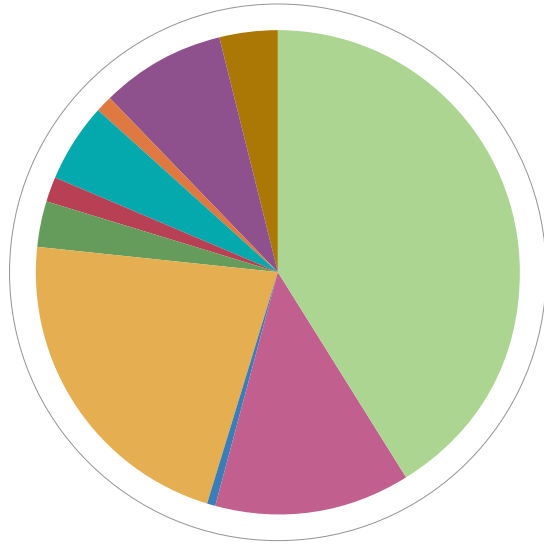
NOT PICTURED:

**Thomas Cangialosi, DDS**

Chair, Department of Orthodontics

# Financials

## Revenues \$96,647,116.07

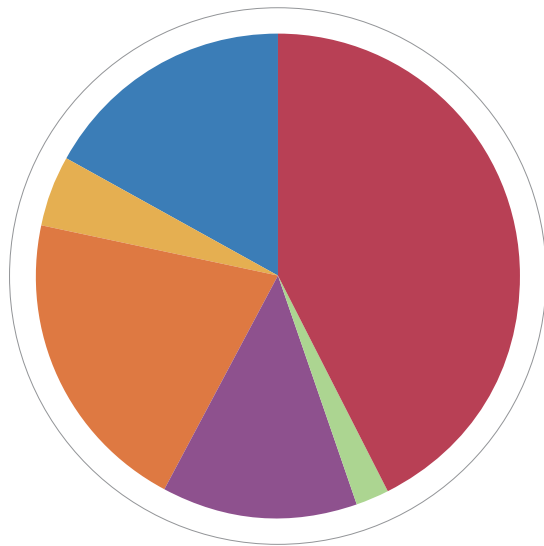


	2023 ACTUAL	PERCENT
Tuition and Fees	\$39,974.94	41.4%
State Paid Fringe Revenues	\$12,496.23	12.9%
Endowments, Investments, Contributions & Gifts*	\$727.65	0.8%
Net Patient Service Revenues	\$21,036.09	21.8%
Housestaff Recoveries	\$2,892.60	3.0%
Affiliate Revenues	\$1,793.85	1.9%
Recoveries of Direct Grant Expense	\$4,946.25	5.1%
Indirect Cost Recoveries	\$1,153.05	1.2%
State Appropriations & Allocated University Support	\$8,079.28	8.4%
Other	\$3,547.18	3.7%
<b>TOTAL REVENUES</b>	<b>\$96,647</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

\* In FY23, RSDM received \$669,978 gift-in-kind donations and principal raised toward RSDM Endowments, which are reflected in the total above.



## Expenses \$95,723,855.87



	2023 ACTUAL	PERCENT
Salaries and Wages	\$40,851.32	42.7%
Housestaff Salaries	\$1,981.74	2.1%
Fringe Benefits	\$12,593.32	13.2%
Non-Salary	\$19,573.33	20.4%
Transfers	\$4,737.46	4.9%
Central Costs	\$15,986.70	16.7%
<b>TOTAL EXPENSES</b>	<b>\$95,724</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

# FY23



### Let's stay in touch

Scan the code to sign up for our monthly newsletter.



Cover: Alumna and Associate Professor of Endodontics Carla Falcon '13 with Jalen Bonitto of Class of 2025.

Editor and writer: Kardelen Koldas  
 Design: Sherer Graphic Design  
 Principal photography: John Emerson





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