



IN MEMORIAM

Nguyen T. Nguyen D.D.S.
Professor of Dentistry, Emeritus
San Francisco
1918 — 2002

The UCSF community sadly observed but warmly memorializes the passing of Dr. Nguyen Thanh Nguyen, emeritus clinical professor in the School of Dentistry, who enjoyed a remarkable 52- year teaching career at UCSF. He passed away on August 6, 2002 in peace and with dignity, as was his purpose in life.

Born in Vietnam in a more serene, idyllic time, he would fondly recall growing up absorbing much of the significance and tranquility of life as he bicycled about the verdant countryside. The creativity and strength of mind he so derived evolved early, as among his most valued accomplishments was the writing of several published songs that honored the historic deeds of the Vietnamese people. One of these, “Marche des Etudiants,” has been the national anthem of the Republic of South Vietnam for nearly 60 years. Another, entitled “Vietnamese Women” (Phu Nu Vietnam), was perhaps by design written at about the same time he met Lee, his loving wife of 54 years.

Forever a gifted student, Nguyen studied dentistry in Hanoi, received his dental degree from Tokyo Dental College in 1945, and immediately began teaching. Fortunately, he was soon drawn to California, and from the time of his arrival in San Francisco he was a resolute advocate of UCSF. Following graduation from the School of Dentistry in 1955 he developed a flourishing dental practice that he maintained until just last year with Lee as his greatest proponent and manager.

Always a visionary, Nguyen expressed his total commitment to the university by teaching in at least three departments and divisions and serving as chair of two for many years. During the 24 years he led the Division of Endodontics he became a Diplomate of the American Board of Endodontics and founded the still successful Northern California Academy of Endodontics.

He was constantly recognized and sought by dentistry’s most prestigious organizations, and traveled both nationally and throughout many continents to bring the best he and UCSF could offer in the advancement of knowledge and skills in dentistry and in good health care. Speaking five languages gave him a certain advantage as a communicator. He personally financed and led many outreach programs to improve access to dental care in Vietnam, and his efforts established a chapter of the International College of Dentists in that country.

However, the Nguyen’s greatest satisfaction came from seeing all of their children graduate from UCSF; Van and Don from the School of Dentistry, and daughter Lana from the School of Medicine. He was humble in praise, but nonetheless deeply grateful to also receive the UCSF Dental Alumni Medal of Honor in 1993, and to be selected as one of the few recognized Distinguished Alumni of the School of Dentistry in 1997. The

following year, as if to say “Enough about me, what about you?”, Nguyen, with Lee and the bequest of a grateful patient, established an annual graduation prize of \$1000 for a UCSF dental student demonstrating outstanding interest and performance in Endodontics.

Never really considering retirement, Nguyen and Lee simply had more time to dance, which they did best on ocean cruises. I can recall watching them in admiration once while on a bay cruise – band playing, the ship rolling steeply in a tight turn, dishes sliding off tables, glasses crashing to the deck - Lee and Nguyen never missed a step.

Those of us who were closest to him professionally unanimously considered him to be the best mentor and friend we had at UCSF. When things were not going so well, he would invariably appear with a smile and a suitably philosophical comment, and usually include a great investment tip as a bonus. Always sincerely concerned with the health of his department and its evolving academic mission, he was most gratified to see a Post Graduate Program in Endodontics take seed at UCSF last year. Although resistant to computer technology in lieu of beautifully crafted words and slides, Dr. Nguyen enthusiastically endorsed, studied, and engaged in teaching us about the dynamic technologic change within the dental profession. We are the grateful beneficiaries of his prodigious library of visual teaching material.

In addition to earlier services, a campus memorial celebrating his life was held in Toland Hall in November 2002. That event would have made him smile broadly and laugh, as did the large group of family and friends gathered in sharing the afternoon. We could sum up the collective thoughts from that day in those of our colleague, Dr. Bob Rosenberg:

“In thinking about Nguyen, I have always been struck by his humanity. Nguyen always made you feel that he cared about you, whether colleague, student, patient or as just another human. He taught me a lot about the consideration of others, no matter what their status in life. Although I continue to fail more often than I would like to, his memory serves to call out the best in us all and that can only be said for a few extraordinary people. It has been a privilege to know Nguyen and to have his guidance.”

Therefore, with the greatest respect I include - “In lieu of flowers, the family has requested that donations be made to the UCSF Foundation in memory of Dr. Nguyen.”

This is as Nguyen would wish, although while he always appreciated the beauty of nature, he was a pragmatist who understood well that we must first grow successful students who will flourish in the world, and that our graduates are our most vital, enduring, and regenerative resource. For his wisdom, we are ever grateful.

Perhaps the Nguyen grandchildren Fiona, Troy, and Kai will someday read this and wish to learn more of their grandfather and of the university he loved.

David W. Rising