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Ophthalmic leaders paint portrait of competence, confidence and courage

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During the American Society of Cataract and Refractive Surgeons (ASCRS) meeting held April 17 to 21 in San Diego, California, the newly rebranded OWL joined with the American Society of Progressive Enterprising Surgeons (ASPENS) to hold an event under the theme “Competence, Confidence & Courage.”

Formerly known as the Ophthalmic Women Leaders, the organization is reinventing itself simply as OWL, which reflects a desire to enhance diverse leadership of all kinds across ophthalmology.

Following are presentation highlights by speakers invited by OWL and ASPENS to share with the audience their sources of courage that have helped them form the competence and confidence needed to succeed in their chosen field.

Neda Shamie, MD

Neda Shamie, MD, an Associate Professor of Ophthalmology and Medical Director at University of Southern California, spent her formative years in a place where few Americans have ever visited much less lived. Dr. Shamie grew up in Iran, which at the time was locked in conflict with neighboring Iraq, and so, there were many nights she and her family were forced to huddle together in the safety of a bomb shelter.

Dr. Shamie has haunting memories of friends and cousins who died during the conflict; and yet, paradoxically, the communal experience of sharing space in a bomb shelter with her friends is also the source of some of her happiest memories. The link between these seemingly incongruous notions—that a bomb shelter could represent both sorrow and happiness—results from a belief that every challenge is an opportunity to define one’s own life. It is a lesson she teaches her daughters: that every decision one makes is a brushstroke and every life an empty canvas upon which you paint your masterpiece.

“The hope is that you will find color and beauty in that masterpiece, and as you evolve as a person and grow in your personality, you will look at it and be proud of it,” Dr. Shamie said.

Dr. Shamie and her family fled worn-torn Iran when she was 13. When she arrived in America, she said she was not only an awkward teenager trying to fit in, but she also faced the obstacle of not knowing a word of English. But, again, she persevered, and four years later graduated high school

being voted by her classmates as Most Likely to Succeed.

These experiences were formative in her development, Dr. Shamie said, as they were valuable for the lessons they taught. To this day, Dr. Shamie said she readily accepts challenges because of the opportunities they represent. She does not fear obstacles, she said, but rather embraces them.

That willingness to be unafraid of challenges would come in handy when Dr. Shamie was presented with one of her greatest challenges. When Dr. Shamie was asked to be the keynote speaker at a meeting of the Iranian Society of Ophthalmology, she faced the prospect of returning to a country she had fled in fear as a teenager and the promise of no protection from the State Department if she went. She also faced the possibility of speaking to a crowd that did not advance or respect the place of women in their profession; she knew going in that many of the men to whom she was about to speak would never shake her hand.

And yet, she went, for the very reason that she would not be readily accepted. She went because she heard of a woman named Neda who died during peaceful protests leading to the Iranian elections. She went because she had an important and profound realization about the juxtaposition of her own self and those in her native country.

“I realized the only difference between this Neda and the Neda that was dead in the streets is that I had opportunities to be here, among you all, who celebrate me as woman, and celebrate my voice, and she didn’t,” Dr. Shamie said.

Judy Gordon, DVM

When asked to find the source of inspiration that led to her believe that she can achieve whatever she wants, Judy Gordon, DVM, a regulatory consultant to the medical device and pharmaceutical industry and an instrumental participant in the FDA approval of a number of ophthalmic products and technologies, looks no further than her parents, each survivors of the Holocaust. Dr. Gordon is a first-generation American, and she proudly speaks of her parents’ influence on her life.

“The awe and optimism my parents had in being Americans is hard to describe, and it left my sister and I with a sense of wonder at being in this country,” Dr. Gordon said.

Although her father clearly wanted a son to carry on the family name, Dr. Gordon said he was always supportive and he constantly reminded her and her sister that they could have any opportunity in the world, so long as they believed that anything was possible.

Dr. Gordon’s mother was no less a positive influence on her life. As a teenager, whenever she felt like she had made the biggest mistake in the world, there was her mother with a simple piece of wisdom that helped her carry through:

“No one is thinking about you nearly as much as you are,” Dr. Gordon recalled her mother telling her, “with emphasis on the ‘no one.’”

The confidence drawn from other people believing in her is a theme that would follow Dr. Gordon throughout her career. While struggling with her career as a veterinarian, she was offered a position working for Chiron Vision, a corporate entity that empowered women to lead. In fact, the company set a mandate that there be a woman in an executive position in each of its divisions. Dr. Gordon was fortunate enough to be one of those people and to guide her charges through important

developments.

“The confidence-inspiring feeling of people having that belief in you was so profound that I got busy doing what I knew how to do and stopped worrying about what I didn’t,” Dr. Gordon said. “Gratefully, with the gift of age, I have the confidence and competence to know that I have made and continue to make what I feel is a meaningful contribution to my community and to our world of ophthalmology.”

Dee Stephenson, MD

Dee Stephenson, MD, recently ascended to the role of President of the American College of Eye Surgeons, becoming just the second woman to hold the prestigious post. She has a thriving ophthalmic practice in Venice, Florida, and is the proud mother of a high-achieving daughter.

From the outside, Dr. Stephenson’s life and accomplishments paint a Norman Rockwell-like picture of success. Yet, the path to reach this point has been far from easy. In fact, Dr. Stephenson said, she has faced a great many personal and professional obstacles, any one of which could have derailed her from her lifelong dream of becoming a doctor.

The thing that separated her from failure, Dr. Stephenson said, is that she recognized early in life that she possessed the power to control her own destiny.

“We all have these terrible things that happen to us, but they don’t have to paint our canvas or tell our story,” Dr. Stephenson said. “My mother always used to tell me that if you don’t like the story of your life, then change it in the next chapter. Your life is your story; you have the opportunity to change it.”

Dr. Stephenson recalled a conversation she had with her daughter when she was a teenager in which she had to admit that she had been adopted. Up until that point, it was something she had kept from her daughter under the misguided notion that she had to protect her.

“It wasn’t difficult being adopted, but it was difficult because I made it difficult,” Dr. Stephenson said.

In fact, when she revealed her “secret,” her daughter thought it was just the coolest thing in the world. It was a humbling moment, Dr. Stephenson said, but one that reminded her that the perception of difficulty is highly subjective.

Other reminders in her life of this personal power would come associated with a much greater degree of pain. Soon after she moved into private practice, Dr. Stephenson learned she had a tumor in her back. She would soon be diagnosed with 3 levels of spina bifida, a bilateral foot drop, and a neurogenic bladder. Dr. Stephenson would have to learn to live with her disability. It took her 8 months to learn to walk again, and to this day, she has no sensation in both feet.

And yet, Dr. Stephenson said, amidst the struggles of dealing with her medical issues, she had an epiphany that, in the grander scheme of things, she was living the dream she had as a child to become a doctor. She was happily married and had a thriving practice in Venice. Rather than seeing her challenges as damning, she saw them merely as bumps in the road—and that everyone faces obstacles, regardless of where they come from.

Dr. Stephenson closed her talk by sharing some wisdom imparted to her by her father that has served as a mantra of sorts:

“Never apologize to anyone for being successful,” Dr. Stephenson said. “If you’ve worked hard, and you’re honest and you’re decent, you deserve everything you get.”

Kate Benedict

Kate Benedict, Vice President of US Sales at Alcon and an OWL Board Member, shared her perspective on finding confidence in unusual places.

Having grown up in a small town in Delaware, Ms. Benedict said, things such as race and gender never became limiting or differentiating factors. Instead, the humility and simplicity of her surroundings dictated that she be on equal footing: playing with the boys on the baseball team was about nothing more than the fact that there were not enough girls her own age to form a girl’s team.

Ms. Benedict said she grew up loving music, a passion that would eventually earn her a scholarship to college. But along the way, she said, the experience of playing music in front of others—and often in front of complete strangers—taught her more than she was aware of at the time. Ms. Benedict said that the confidence she has today in speaking in front of large audiences can be traced directly to those early recitals and performances, where she learned to simply let go and trust her training and practice. She shared that there is a valuable lesson that can be learned from this:

“Don’t worry about getting confidence from your career. Look at your own life and you can find sources of confidence,” Ms. Benedict said.

Ms. Benedict said she can look back at various times in her life and recognize key moments where she exemplified courage. Although she started college studying chemical engineering, she soon learned her passion was elsewhere. She took an accounting class and realized she was hooked. She went on to earn an MBA, but realized she wanted better interaction with consumers. And so, she left her comfortable confines and took a job in sales. In each instance, Ms. Benedict said she was guided by a sense that she had to follow her passion.

Throughout her career, Ms. Benedict said she has been guided by many words of wisdom from many mentors, but passion and the confidence to follow it seems to be a reoccurring theme. One piece of advice she received from a close friend and mentor has been particularly meaningful:

“Success is not a result of spontaneous combustion; you have to set yourself on fire.”

It is a message, Ms. Benedict said, that exemplifies that each person is the instrument of his or her own success, as well as the most obvious impediment when success does not occur.

“At the end of the day, you are the only one who can limit what you do,” Ms. Benedict said.

Michele Gray is a Project Specialist at Pascale Communications, Principal at Gray Communications and an active OWL member. She brings more than 17 years of public relations experience to her clients, including 12 years in ophthalmology and optometry. Contact her at michele_gray@me.com.

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Judy Gordon, DVM, is a clinical and regulatory consultant who brings over 25 years of experience in pharmaceuticals, biologics, and medical devices to her consulting practice, ClinReg Consulting Services, Inc., with FDA approvals of numerous 510(k)s, PMAs and NDAs. She may be reached at judy@clinregconsulting.com.

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OWL promotes and develops diverse leadership to advance ophthalmic innovation and patient care. The organization's mission includes working across ophthalmology to provide professional and personal development and create opportunities for collaboration. OWL regularly hosts discussions and speakers on topics, like the one featured here, that are of compelling interest to its members and stakeholders. For more information about OWL membership and upcoming educational and networking programs, visit www.owl-site.org.