A Life In Service In Dentistry- From United States Army General To Dean Of Tufts University School Of Dental Medicine: The Life Of Robert B. Shira, D.D.S.

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A Life In Service In Dentistry- From United States Army General To Dean Of Tufts University School Of Dental Medicine: The Life Of Robert B. Shira, D.D.S.

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Robert B. Shira D.D.S.

The life of Dr. Robert B. Shira should serve today as an example of the boundless possible ways by which dentists may serve their fellow man. Dr. Shira answered his call to serve in many diverse capacities-including practicing dentist, American Dental Association president, chief of the United States Army Dental Corps, editor, lecturer, author, vice-president and provost of Tufts University, and dean of Tufts University School of Dental Medicine. Throughout Dr. Shira's nearly 92 years of life, he achieved much and inspired many through his actions. The true legacy of Dr. Shira's life is not in the multitude of well-deserved awards and honors which were bestowed upon him during his lifetime but, rather, on his willingness and desire to reach down from his positions of power to mentor, guide, and inspire his younger colleagues. This is the true mark of a great man.

Dr. Shira was born on December 2, 1910 in Butler, Pennsylvania. Two years later his family moved to Dewey, Oklahoma where his education started in the public schools of Dewey (1). He excelled in academics from an early age and was selected Outstanding Student in his graduating high school class of 1927. He then attended Bartlesville (Oklahoma) Junior College for one year before entering Kansas City's Western Dental College (2). Shira graduated from dental school four years later in 1932 with a D.D.S. degree and as a member of Omicron Kappa Upsilon Honor Dental Fraternity (1). Upon graduation, Dr. Shira began practicing dentistry in Dewey and Pawhuska, Oklahoma for a period of six years (1).

At this point, Dr. Shira was about to embark on the next important chapter of his life: he was one of twelve successful applicants from a pool of 350 dentists applying to the U.S. Dental Corps (1). Shira was commissioned a first lieutenant in 1938 at Barksdale Field, Louisiana where he served as dental officer until being ordered, in 1941, to the Panama Canal Zone where he served as Chief of Dental Activities at Gorgas Hospital in Ancon until 1947 (3). It was during this period of time that Shira taught himself oral surgery. He was then transferred to Leatherman General Hospital in San Francisco, CA where he served as Chief of Oral Surgery until 1954. Shira then served as Chief of Dental Services and Chief of Oral Surgery at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC (3) from 1954 to 1964. It was at Walter Reed Hospital, in 1958, that Shira removed a broken molar of President Dwight D. Eisenhower (4). Dr. Shira also assisted in the establishment of the Army Dental Intern Program and an oral surgery residency program (5). Dr. Shira returned to Europe in 1964 as Dental Surgeon until 1966 when he was appointed Director of Dental Activities of the U.S. Army in Europe (3).

In November 1966, Shira was promoted to the rank of Brigadier General and was transferred back to Washington, DC (3) to serve as Director of Dental Services at Walter Reed Medical Center. Less than a year later, in September 1967, Shira was promoted again. This time he was promoted to the rank of Major General and assigned as Deputy Surgeon General and Chief of the Army Dental Corps. He was responsible for all military dental activities worldwide (1). In November of 1971, Dr. Shira retired from an exemplary military career (1). During his illustrious military career, Dr. Shira received many honors and distinctions. Amongst these are the National Defense Service Medal (with Oak Leaf Cluster), Army Commendation Medal, American Defense Medal, American Campaign Medal, and the World War II Victory Medal (3).

Dr. Robert Shira chaired many committees and councils during his career. His service as chair of the American Dental Association's Council of Dental Therapeutics indirectly led to the next chapter in Dr. Shira's life. A member of the Council, Dr. Walter Guralnick, suggested to Dr. Al Uhmann, chairman of the dean's search committee, that Dr. Shira be considered for the position of dean at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine (6). Dr. Shira impressed the search committee consisting of Uhmann, Dr. Lauro Cavazos, the Vice Presidents for Finance and Development, and Dean Maloney of the medical school (6). After 33 years of distinguished military service, Dr. Shira was appointed Dean of the Tufts University School of Dental Medicine in 1971. He would serve in that position until 1979. He would later serve Tufts University as Senior Vice President, Provost, and Vice President for Health Sciences until...
retiring from Tufts University in 1993. In 1996, a Robert B. Shira Lecture was established at Tufts University (7).

As dean, Shira's organizational and leadership skills were evident. Upon becoming dean, the first thing Shira did was to solicit ideas and suggestions from the dental students. He then met with alumni. Shira established a professional dress code for the clinics and established the Millennium Club ("M") whose members gave $1,000 annual gifts to the school. He placed many well-respected colleagues in positions of power throughout the school. Shira also instituted an externship program for dental students (6) which provided the graduating student with a more comprehensive dental education. During his deanship, Dr. Shira accepted the challenge of several members of the Massachusetts Dental Society who asked him to run for the presidency of the American Dental Association. He was successful and served as President in 1975-1976 (6).

In 1996, Dr. Shira returned to live in the Washington, DC area (1) but remained active in many dental organizations. He served as President of the Pierre Fauchard Academy Foundation (1). During his career, he also served as President of the American Board of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgeons and as editor of the Journal of Oral Surgery (4). He was inducted into the International Dental Hall of Fame in October, 2000. Dr. Robert B. Shira passed away on November 22, 2002 at the age of 91 (4). He was predeceased by his wife of 60 years, Anne Eileen Shira (5). Dr. and Mrs. Shira had three daughters and eight grandchildren (5). The long, productive life of Dr. Shira was filled with many diverse roles but can be summed up in one word—service.

References

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