

Profession Progression, the Story of a Lifetime, Part 5: Kathryn Gilliam

Kathryn Gilliam learned early on about dentistry and, more importantly, the connection between the health of our mouth and our body.

It started with world-renowned dentist, Dr. Phillip Kamish.

I've been in dentistry all my life. My father was world-renowned dentist, Dr. Phillip Kamish. At 13, he came to this country from Romania, speaking six languages, none of them English, with his parents and little brother just before World War II began. My father quickly learned the language and excelled in school, ultimately earning his medical and dental degrees simultaneously from Loyola University in Chicago.

My father chose to practice dentistry, and served as an Air Force dentist for over 30 years. During his service he was required to perform various medical surgeries, so his combined medical and dental training was vital. Perhaps that's what helped him recognize the mouth body connection. He often said the mouth is the gateway to the body, and that one can't have a healthy body without a healthy mouth. He was ahead of his time. My dad became known as the go-to-guy for extraordinarily difficult cases. We were regularly entertained around the dinner table with stories of his adventures in the operating room and challenging dental patients.

As a child, I shadowed my dad and his dental hygienists.

As a child in my father's old lab coat, sleeves rolled up, I did science experiments in my backyard. I shadowed my dad and his dental hygienists at work. I loved the smell of isopropyl alcohol that they used to clean everything and the immaculate order of the instruments and supplies appealed to me. I remember beaming with pride as my father gave painless injections, and watching his nervous patients' worried expressions relax as they realized it wouldn't hurt. It's not surprising that a little girl who idolized her father would want to follow his footsteps, but it wasn't a straight path.

At the University of Nebraska, I majored in journalism and advertising. After graduating with honors, I moved to Houston to find a job. My timing couldn't have been worse. The oil industry, and almost every other industry with it, crashed in the 1980s. One local newspaper went out of business, and the only jobs I was offered were secretarial.

I applied to the University of Texas Dental Branch in Houston and was accepted.

My parents advised me to go back to school in a recession-proof field: dentistry. It didn't take much persuasion. The memories of isopropyl alcohol, perfectly ordered instruments, and starched white uniforms were dear to me. So I applied to the University of Texas Dental Branch in Houston and was accepted. In those days, there weren't many women dentists, and a two-year

course appealed to me more than another four years, so I started their dental hygiene program a few weeks after I married my high school sweetheart, Rob.

One of my proudest moments was when the National Board Exam grades were announced. Summoned to the office of the dean of the dental school, I was told I had missed only one question, *scoring the highest of any other graduate in the history of the school*. The dean invited me to be a member of the dental school class the following fall. I was anxious to start a family, so I declined, but it was an honor to be asked.

I've regretted that decision on occasion, even though I love being a dental hygienist. I'd like to be able to set the standard of patient care for the entire office, especially in educating staff on the very real connection between mouth and body. So yes, I'd probably make a different choice if I could go back in time.

Our dentist allowed me to practice according to my own high standards.

During the early years of my career, a patient with head and neck cancer profoundly affected me, and my passion for early detection sparked. A head and neck screening had always been a part of my regular routine. I knew, however, that even though we were taught to do it in school, many of my peers skipped this essential step. My insides burned to get every dental practitioner to do these crucial screenings. I just didn't know how to make my voice heard.

I was in practice with a wonderful dentist at this time. Cecil was jovial, kind and generous. He treated his team (never "staff") like family, including us in all of his family's events and coming to ours. I had complete autonomy and plenty of time to practice according to my own high standards. Cecil hired a Fortune Management practice coach who helped our team clarify our goals and develop strategies for reaching them. We worked like a well-oiled machine and were well rewarded for it. We built a thriving fee-for-service practice of loyal patients and had a great time doing it. Those years were fabulous, until Cecil announced that we had done so well, he was able to retire 10 years earlier than planned and would sell the practice.

The new dentist turned out to be a terrible disappointment. I tried to stay because I had been with those patients for 14 years. They felt like family, as did the team. But staying meant an ethical compromise, and I just couldn't do it. So with a heavy heart, I left the practice.

Susan sent my resume to Hygiene Mastery for Vicki's consideration.

I'd been assisting our coach, Susan, in her seminars, presenting various dental hygiene topics, including the ever-important topic of cancers in the body being detected early via their connection with the mouth. All hygienists should know about early detection of head and neck cancer, care for cancer patients, and soft tissue management. At this time, another Fortune Management coach, Vicki McManus, was starting a hygiene coaching company called Hygiene Mastery. Unbeknownst to me, Susan sent my resume for Vicki's consideration.

It was a defining moment in my career to be chosen as one of the *original eight Hygiene Mastery coaches in the country*. The training and encouragement I received from Vicki changed the trajectory of my career. I continued my clinical work and began coaching and publishing articles and continuing education courses. The response to my writing and the success my coaching clients experienced fueled my confidence. I was a busy working and traveling mother, but I had great support at home and I truly enjoyed my varied career.

I was finally able to influence other hygienists to perform a thorough head and neck cancer screening at every hygiene appointment. It's a non-negotiable point for me, and I accept no excuse. If the dental hygiene team will commit to that standard, I'll be their coach and their biggest advocate. If not, then I'm not the coach for them.

Hygiene Mastery was eventually dissolved due to conflicts with the parent company. We went on to develop our individual businesses; mine was called Empowered Hygiene. In the years since, I've received advice and unconditional support from each of my former Hygiene Mastery colleagues. I'm inspired by their knowledge, success and spirit of abundance. I've been blessed to be associated with these women entrepreneurs for over 16 years, and I count each one a true friend.

Family comes first.

When my father became ill, I took several years away from Empowered Hygiene. I continued my clinical work, but I didn't accept coaching clients nor did I publish. I don't regret the time I was able to spend with my beloved father before he passed from this world, but I will admit that those years affected my career. I devoted myself to my sons and husband after feeling I had neglected them during my father's illness, choosing not to return to coaching, which meant traveling, until both boys left for college.

After my youngest left for college, I hesitated to restart my coaching career. I feared my long absence had allowed my name to be forgotten, and I wasn't sure there was room for me anymore with so many outstanding writers, consultants and speakers in our field. But a voice inside told me I still have important things to share and that I need to help shift our profession to follow a medical model of wellness care.

It was time to focus on the connection between the mouth and the rest of the body.

I felt it was time for us to make the connection between the mouth and the rest of the body, like my father had always journal. I reached out to my friends yet again, and they gave me great advice that I followed. I rebranded my company. Empowered Hygiene seemed to limit me to the hygiene department, and my desire is to educate the entire team about the oral systemic link. Thus, PerioLinks, LLC was born.

More excellent advice led me to Katherine Eitel's Lioness Learning Transformational Training courses, where I learned to use experiential learning techniques. I joined the Speaking Consulting Network to meet other professionals who believe in helping one another achieve.

Also important to me, I joined the American Academy of Oral Systemic Health, where I finally found others who were making the connection between the mouth and the body.

Next I graduated from the Bale Doneen Preceptorship, an intensive two-day, 17-credit hour course for healthcare professionals to *prevent cardiovascular disease and diabetes*. Both Dr. Bradley Bale and Dr. Amy Doneen emphasized the importance of dental hygiene care in controlling systemic inflammation. How empowering to be recognized for the critical work we do and to see research that shows our work can improve not just the oral health, but also the systemic health of our patients.

Advice from another of my friends led me to Katherine Eitel's Inspirational Speakers Workshop, to hone my presentation skills. Although a confident writer, trainer, and coach; I've been hesitant to speak to large audiences. Katherine's workshop instilled the confidence I needed, and this year I spoke to 500 people, my largest group yet!

We're never finished; always moving forward!

In my opinion we're never done learning or improving. I believe that association with other professionals, and continued training in your areas of interest, are mandatory for success as an entrepreneur. The spirit I've found among Dental Entrepreneur Women is one of abundance and collaboration. Dental Entrepreneur Women empowered me, and I, as a woman dental entrepreneur, am honored to empower others on this journey.



Kathryn Gilliam, BA, RDH, FAAOSH

Kathryn Gilliam, BA, RDH, FAAOSH, is a regular contributing author to Today's RDH and many other publications. Kathryn is a proponent of incorporating the latest scientific research on the multiple oral – systemic links into practical clinical protocols. She is a well-recognized speaker, dental practice consultant, and practicing clinician. Kathryn can be reached for comments or questions at Kathryn@PerioLinks.com.