
Remembering and Furthering the Vision of an Optometric Trailblazer, Alden N. Haffner, O.D., Ph.D. (1928 – 2016)

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As a man dedicated to paying respect to the past, connecting people in the present and setting a vision for the future of optometry, health care, and public health, Dr. Alden N. Haffner, who was called Norman by his friends, was truly a giant and unflagging advocate for the profession. It was with great sadness that we noted his passing on June 22, 2016, but it is with hope that we look towards a future where doctors of optometry build on the foundation that he established.

Dr. Haffner was a man with high expectations for his colleagues and profession and I had the privilege to know him and call him my mentor. I remember clearly walking into his office on the day that I interviewed for admission to SUNY Optometry. When I entered his office, a male colleague made a comment about my appearance. Dr. Haffner immediately stopped him and said, “never mind how she looks. It’s her brain and drive that should impress you. She will be a great optometrist.” High expectations from a legend in optometry and someone optometry will never cease to celebrate and recognize.

A fellow New Yorker, Dr. Haffner graduated with his Doctor of Optometry degree from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry (PCO) in 1952, eventually receiving an MPA and Ph.D. from New York University (NYU). He constructed and taught the first formal, semester-long course in public health in academic optometry at PCO in 1966, before becoming the founding president of my alma mater, the State University of New York (SUNY) College of Optometry in 1971. He was appointed Vice Chancellor of Health Sciences of the entire SUNY system, which included overseeing medical schools, but returned as the President of SUNY Optometry in 1988, serving in that capacity until his retirement in 2005.

Even before I met Dr. Haffner, I knew of his dedication to understanding, memorializing and gleaning insights from the past. A friend of my father’s, he was a titan in the world of optometry. His memory was second to none. He used his incredible knowledge of the profession and the history of medicine daily, applying it to the establishment of the SUNY College of Optometry and using it to further the knowledge of his students and the profession of optometry as a whole.

While keeping an eye on the past, he made sure that the professionals and students around him advanced. He was a networker as well as an instigator. Each conversation and encounter was more than just an engagement – he inspired those around him to think, challenge and learn from each other. You were never just “on the phone” with him. You were likely on speakerphone so that your conversation with him could further inform others. And the quickest route to his respect wasn’t deference but to push back. The first time I pushed back as a colleague I was unsure of what his reaction would be, but knowing I was right, I pressed the issue. To my surprise, instead of chastising me, he smiled.

Across his numerous leadership roles, whether it was President of the Association of Schools and Colleges of Optometry (ASCO) or President at SUNY, Dr. Haffner never let pass an opportunity to connect professionals and propel our discipline.

The unifying theme that runs through Dr. Haffner's career is his impact and ability to be a catalyst for change. As an Army veteran, Dr. Haffner championed a number of public health issues across his career and served extensively on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA) top-level health care advisory panel, the VA Special Medical Advisory Group (SMAG).

Appointed to the panel by President Ronald Reagan in 1987, Dr. Haffner helped spur important initiatives to advance health care for veterans, including an effort to expand access to eye and vision care in the VA system. As a panel member, Dr. Haffner recommended that the VA conduct a comprehensive inventory of its eye care resources that would ultimately document unacceptable waiting times and deficiencies in staffing levels at VA clinics. His subsequent report led to improved optometry staffing and increased numbers of optometry residency positions at VA medical centers. Dr. Haffner served on the VA SMAG for 25 years, the longest anyone ever served.

He not only changed the face of VA care, Dr. Haffner brought the optometry profession to the tipping point and carried us over. The architect of the LaGuardia meeting, Dr. Haffner convened a group of nearly two dozen optometric educators and researchers at LaGuardia airport in New York in 1968 to discuss the imbalance between optometrists' scope of responsibility and educational requirements. Historically a drugless profession, optometry was put on a path toward the medical model with an agreed-upon need for scope expansion through bolstered academic curriculum and heightened state and federal advocacy.

A former president of the New York State Optometric Association (NYSOA) who served on numerous AOA committees, Dr. Haffner was awarded the AOA Distinguished Service Award, the Eminent Service Award from the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) and was inducted into the National Optometry Hall of Fame in 2000.

Dr. Haffner earned these honors because he knew the true meaning of the phrase "Better Together" and it was his vision that set the future of optometry. He helped advance our profession into the diagnosis and treatment of disease, won the right for optometrists to be recognized as commissioned officers and created residencies for optometry.

As I have set the path for my career, I have always held my actions and direction to the standards of two incredibly important people in my life – my father and Dr. Haffner. His vision created a lasting imprint on our profession across the nation. He was my mentor, colleague, friend and inspiration, and he will be greatly missed. But I know that I and my fellow doctors of optometry will continue his efforts and bring to life a better future for the profession and our patients.