



*Dr. Joseph Dean Robertson and his wife, Juanita "Skippy" Robertson. All photos provided by Dr. Robertson's daughters Rindy Hyde and Sally Kern.*



*Dr. Robertson, in uniform, during his time in the U.S. Army Air Corps*

## Remembering a Legacy

### What words do you use to describe a legend?

In the case of Joseph Dean Robertson, D.D.S., the words follow a theme that reveals how deeply meaningful he was to all who knew him.

A true gentleman. An incredible role model. A genuine professional. A mentor extraordinaire. A consummate learner. Everyone's favorite grandfather. A person who made you feel like he had been waiting his whole life just to talk to you.

Dr. Robertson, Oklahoma's first licensed pediatric dentist, died on Feb. 5, at the age of 101. His influence on the field of dentistry, the OU College of Dentistry and the people he encountered in a century's worth of living cannot be overstated.

"Dr. Robertson represented the eloquence of a professional," said Raymond A. Cohlmiya, D.D.S., dean of the OU College of Dentistry. "He was compassionate, caring and driven at the same time. His life represents a true legacy of one person living on forever."



### A Professional for Life

In 1947, Dr. Robertson began his pediatric dentistry private practice in Oklahoma City after graduate training and four years with the U.S. Army Air Corps. In 1964, he was joined in practice by his longtime colleague, Don Haskins, D.D.S.

Dr. Robertson was a beloved dentist to children and families across central Oklahoma, but he also had a passion for education. In 1976, he joined the faculty of the OU College of Dentistry, where he inspired many students with his values and dedication to the field.

Several of those students are now College of Dentistry faculty members and administrators: Tim Fagan, D.D.S., chair of the Division of Pediatric Dentistry; Nanay Shadid, D.D.S., chair of the Division of Comprehensive Care; and Kevin Haney, D.D.S., assistant dean for academic and student affairs. All have worked extensively in pediatric dentistry and have drawn upon Dr. Robertson's wisdom and guidance throughout their careers.

"He wanted to make sure dentistry always lived up to its best in terms of professionalism and care," Dr. Haney said. "He had high expectations for our performance as students because he wanted

*"He just had an aura about him that his patients could feel. I never saw him upset or overly excited – he was very even-keeled. He was like a big loving teddy bear to the kids he treated."*

*— Dr. Fagan*

the best for children. But he didn't hammer us as students. He had a way of getting us to do our very best. When we worked with him, we wanted to do our best for him."

Dr. Robertson taught the knowledge and skills of dentistry, but he also imparted something even more important: making patients feel at ease and appreciated. Few people could do that as well as Dr. Robertson did.

Dr. Robertson's educational legacy lives on in the Dr. J. Dean Robertson Clinic, one of three of the college's Comprehensive Care Clinics. The clinic is where dental and dental hygiene students treat patients, learning how to perform services that range from cleanings and fillings to crowns and bridges. Dr. Shadid, who previously worked in private practice, primarily treating children, said she has never forgotten what Dr. Robertson taught her about patient care. "He told me, 'It's all about voice control. The quieter and calmer you are, the better your patients will accept you.' He was exactly right," she said.

Because of an age requirement at the time, Dr. Robertson had to retire from academic dentistry when he reached age 70. But he didn't stay in retirement long. In 1988, he rejoined his former private practice, where he continued to see patients and perform surgeries until he was just shy of his 93rd birthday.

Dr. Robertson believed that his patients were his for life, not just during their childhoods or when they lived in the area. As he told all who sought his advice, dentistry is less about technical skills and more about being a part of people's lives.

"We learned from Dr. Robertson that the dentistry procedure is the easy part. Getting to that point is the hard part," Dr. Cohlmi said. "I can tell you a hundred patient stories that have nothing to do with dentistry. We treat loneliness and fear and distress. Dr. Robertson taught us how to approach the patient – he taught us that compassion and kindness would get us to the point where we could perform the necessary procedure."





*Dr. Robertson, at his 100th birthday celebration, poses with a group of dental students, all of whom received a scholarship through the college's J. Dean Robertson Society.*

### Values That Changed a Profession

Perhaps the most visible evidence of Dr. Robertson's influence on his profession was at his funeral. At 101 years old, he had outlived most, if not all, of his peers. Yet the church was packed with family, friends, former students and dentists from across Oklahoma and beyond.

"He did more for children's dental health than anyone in the state has done or probably ever will do again," Dr. Haney said. "Everyone respected Dr. Robertson, not just pediatric dentists. General dentists, dentists from other specialties ... everyone knew him and what he did for the field."

In 1948, just after he had established his own practice in Oklahoma, Dr. Robertson was one of eight dentists who formed what is now called the Southwestern Society of Pediatric Dentistry. He also served as president of the group, which was composed of members from seven southwestern states. Together they helped to advance the field.

Dr. Robertson was elected president of the Oklahoma Dental Association in 1968 and was honored as its Dentist of the Year in 1979. He also never quit learning himself. In 1978, he earned his master's degree in education, graduating summa cum laude from the University of Central Oklahoma (then called Central State University).

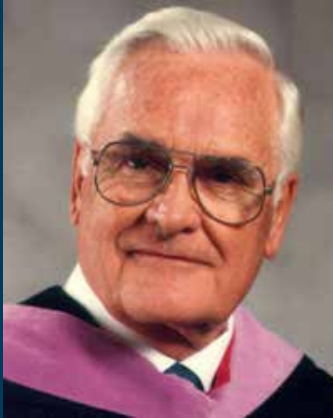
"If one were looking for the model of an ideal dentist, one could stop with Dean Robertson," Frank Miranda, D.D.S., a founding faculty member of the College of Dentistry, wrote in one of its magazines. "I found many reasons to add him to my small list of heroes: his consummate love of dentistry, his unwavering devotion to family, his consistently gentle nature, his skills as an educator, and his lifelong commitment to the service of others."

Dr. Cohlmiä said Dr. Robertson taught him there are three aspects of being a professional, and he has turned to them again and again during his career as a dentist and a college dean. The first is to be educated at a higher level than the general public. The second is to possess the ability to self-govern. The third is to advance the arts and sciences to people everywhere.

"I use those three values as a defining factor of who we are," Dr. Cohlmiä said. "When I've faced tough issues, I would often talk to Dr. Robertson, and he would say, 'Let's look at those three values again, Raymond. What do we need to do to continue with those values?' Dr. Robertson always had the ability to bring me back to the foundation of the profession."

### A Legacy That Lives On

Even though he is gone, Dr. Robertson's values will continue indefinitely. One of the most prominent ways is through the J. Dean Robertson



Dr. J. Dean Robertson practiced dentistry for a total of 63 years in Oklahoma, a feat of longevity in itself.

He also contributed greatly to the field that he loved and was honored with many awards in return. Some of his civic contributions and achievements include:

- Honored by the College of Dentistry when it re-named its comprehensive care clinic to the Dr. J. Dean Robertson Clinic
- Received the Regents' Alumni Award from the University of Oklahoma
- Received the James A. Saddoris Lifetime Achievement Award from the Oklahoma Dental Association
- Named Dentist of the Year by the Oklahoma Dental Association
- Received two Outstanding Clinical Teacher awards from the College of Dentistry
- Served as president of the Rotary Club of Oklahoma City
- Received the Lifetime Achievement Award and the "Heavy Lifting Award" from the Rotary Club
- Served as president of the Oklahoma Dental Association
- Served as founding member and president of the Southwestern Society of Pediatric Dentists

Dr. Robertson was married to his wife, Juanita "Skippy" Lucille Anderson, for 70 years and they had four children. Dr. Robertson was an avid swimmer, and among the many activities he and his wife enjoyed together was dancing. They were honored with a bench outside the dental school that is dedicated to their partnership and contributions.

Society, the college's fundraising arm that was formed in 1988. The late '80s were a difficult time for the College of Dentistry. Both the college and the state were experiencing financial woes, and there was serious talk about shutting down the college. Leaders knew they had to create a mechanism for attracting private donations.

"Everyone agreed that the name for this new venture would be critical to its success," Russ Stratton, D.D.S., the college's dean at the time, wrote in a previous magazine. "To bring the school and the community closer together, and at the same time have the credibility to attract a broad base of support, we needed a name that would be highly regarded not only at the school, but by alumni and non-alumni dentists throughout the state. I don't recall exactly who suggested Dean Robertson, but whoever it was couldn't have come up with a more ideal name; no one in Oklahoma was more respected and loved than Dean."

Gifts to the J. Dean Robertson Society have been used for a variety of college initiatives, including student scholarships, capital improvements, care for the underserved population, student research projects and externships, which allow students to provide dental care in rural communities around Oklahoma. Each project funded by the group is tied to a value that Dr. Robertson held, perhaps especially the dental care provided to Oklahomans of all ages who otherwise couldn't afford treatment.

"Dr. Robertson always said that the secret to wealth was that you had to give it all away," Dr. Cohlmiia said. "His belief in taking care of your fellow man was fundamental."

Dr. Robertson's presence continues to be felt in the College of Dentistry's admissions process. Dentistry is a top career right now – this year, the college had more than 1,700 applications for about 60 positions, Dr. Cohlmiia said. Many potential students have high grade-point averages and admirable resumes, but that doesn't guarantee admission. Rather, the college is looking for students who also understand the mission as lived by Dr. Robertson.

"We're looking for students who understand they are taking care of their fellow man," Dr. Cohlmiia said. "Our students understand what it means to be a professional and not a dental student." That bodes well for a college whose aim is to put patients first, and in the process improve their oral health.

"One of the keys to any successful dental practice is to be able to communicate with people," said Stephen Young, D.D.S., former dean of the college. "Dr. Robertson was a communicator. He would put people at ease and make them feel good about themselves. We all want that. We love it when someone makes us feel good, and he made people feel good. It was never about him – it was always about you."