

Dental school during a pandemic

Becoming a Dentist: Students adjust to learning at home

Editor's note: In November 2017, the ADA News launched Becoming a Dentist, a series of stories that follows three dental students at the University of Maryland School of Dentistry — Dan Yang, LaShonda Shepherd and Ben Horn — during their journeys to becoming dentists. See all the stories in the series at ADA.org/BeADentist.

BY JENNIFER GARVIN

Baltimore — If this were a typical day, and if these were typical times, LaShonda would be in her pediatrics competency exam, fresh off a cup of coffee, before heading to a three-hour simulation lab.

Dan might try to squeeze in a quick lunch between lab and appointments — maybe at Nando's with Kevin, his fourth-year "big brother."

Ben might be presenting a patient with his final implant crowns.

But nothing is typical during the COVID-19 pandemic, including at the University of Maryland School of Dentistry and dental schools everywhere. Clinic appointments are canceled. Lectures and exams have all moved online. The school's dental faculty tend to the emergency cases.

"The thing that I'm sure all of my classmates are worried about is the appointments that we had to cancel," Dan said. "I think we all just want to provide and care for our patients' needs."

Dentures. Implants. Crowns. These things are all on hold as the students wait for life to return to normal. If there is a "normal."

"By design, the D-3 spring semester schedule is geared heavily to clinic time," Dan said. "But really, a large portion of my time would be devoted to providing patient care, including partial and complete dentures."

"Before the break, I had several operative and removable prosthetic appointments scheduled," LaShonda said. "Some are pretty extensive cases, which have spanned over months, so I was looking forward to finally starting the dentures."

Ben had a patient who was days away from receiving his final implant crowns and custom abutments. He'd been along for the entire journey — from the patient's first appointment after a bike accident to performing extractions and restorations. Ben even assisted on an implant placement.

"Now I'm not sure when he will get his two front teeth," he said. "I feel badly for him. It is a rather helpless feeling. I text message with my patients to catch up with them and make sure they are not in acute pain, but besides that, my hands are tied."

Another patient was waiting on a posterior crown. To her, the treatment symbolized much more than just another restoration.

"She was looking forward to having the work done to avoid her occasional symptoms and to update her esthetics before interviewing for a job," Ben said. "The pandemic means so much to so many people. I see my job as a dental student and the hiatus from the clinic as a relatively small issue when compared to what some people are facing right now."

Going from a stimulating classroom environment to a solo learning experience at home has presented its own challenges.

Dan misses the structured learning environment — from class schedule to having a professor right there to answer questions. LaShonda's had to deal with a spotty internet connection.

"Online learning is a lot more on your own," Dan said. "I have to sort of discern for myself the main points on each slide of a PowerPoint presentation. When course material is just available online, I feel as though sometimes the main points that the professor wants us to understand



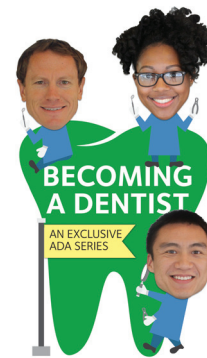
Lessons: Ben gives his 6-year-old daughter, Kendall, riding tips.



Family: LaShonda takes a break from studying to FaceTime with her sister and mother.



Old times: Dan, left, along with fourth-year Kevin Son, eat at Nando's back in January.



can be missed, or we spend too much time on something that the professors did not intend on us to focus on."

One of the ways the dental school is adjusting to administering exams and competencies online is by requiring students to set up webcams on their home computers, Dan said.

"This way [an instructor] can monitor and track programs that are running during the exam, as well as track the students physically like if they stay seated during the exam and what their eyes are looking at," he added.

Ben has had to figure out how to do classes alongside his three children — two of whom are school age.

"My wife and I have learned we are not the best pandemic home schoolers, and we are so very thankful for the teachers who are working hard to adapt to an online forum, even for preschoolers. They deserve a raise for teaching our children day in and day out — it is not easy."

Along with missing the classroom aspect of school, LaShonda was bummed to miss out on her remaining Generation NeXT sessions — the mentoring program she volunteers at through the University of Maryland dental school — along with other extracurriculars, including the ADA Dentist and Student Lobby Day and Student National Dental Association banquet.

But as with everything in life, some silver linings have emerged.

"I am thankful for the time that I get to spend at home and the conversations that I can have with my folks and brother that I wouldn't normally have," said Dan, who moved back home for the duration of the pandemic. "I also have two cats. I am sure they are happy that we are all home."

Dan said another bonus is being able to take advantage of the university's continued education courses.

"In school, we have a rigid curriculum, and you take courses that you have to take. It is refreshing to cherry-pick topics and lectures that you personally want to hear more about."

He's also getting more sleep. So is LaShonda. "Even with my wacky sleep schedule, I have more energy than I've had in a while. I've also started to work out — as much as I can — and cook again, so that probably helps," she said.

"I've been able to spend more time with family and friends. We've had virtual brunches, book club meetings, and even a few group workout sessions. I rarely go a day without FaceTiming my mom now. If nothing else, COVID-19 has reminded us of what is truly most important. And, I'm hopeful that once the dust settles, we'll emerge from this experience with a renewed sense of purpose and a greater appreciation for the small things. Until then, we have Netflix."

"My oldest turned 6 yesterday, and my wife, Caitlin, and I — mostly her — organized a drive-by celebration with a parade of cars all slowly driving by with signs and decorations wishing her a happy birthday," Ben said. "In a strange and peculiar way, her COVID-19 pandemic birthday was perfect, and she had a great time. My 4-year-old started riding a real pedal bike today, and the look on her face was pure gold. Our youngest started walking and mostly skipped that stage for running, so that has been fun to see him become fully mobile. This has been valuable time for us. It's kind of overwhelming to think of, but we might not ever get to spend this much consecutive time together again." ■