Remembering Dr. R. Chester Redhead

By Dr. David L. Hoexter, Editor in Chief

Dr. R. Chester Redhead peacefully passed away this past December. He was an energetic, omnipresent and charismatic young man. Graduating from Howard University Dental School in 1954, he enlisted in the U.S. Army, serving more than two years. He then served as an officer in the U.S. Air Force Reserve.

Chester always was enthusiastic about dentistry. But one must be reminded of the social barriers and deeply ingrained discrimination encompassing the era of his career. Overcoming the obstacles, Chester joined and participated in the ADA. He was a prominent, active member of the First District Dental Society in the country. First District Dental Society, the largest local dental society in the country.

Chester kept taking dental education courses to ensure his patients in his private practice, on 135th Street in Harlem, received the finest and most up-to-date care. Imagine my surprise when I was presenting a continuing education course on periodontal surgery and implants, that when I looked out at the participants, taking notes and listening was Chester — what a feeling.

Many social changes in dentistry were initially brought about for black dentists in New York’s dental societies by Dr. Warren Walters and his father. It was slow but they opened the door, and Chester furthered such efforts. Today, many of the results of that difficult, early work are taken for granted.

Chester was jovial and charming, with quick humor — and he was a great dresser. He did far more than put in this time. In addition to running his dental practice and serving in dental society leadership roles, he was a husband and father of three young men. Everyone who has been involved in dental society business and politics knows the staggering impact on personal life and professional practice. Yet while serving as president of the First District, he accepted being a chairman and participant of the Greater New York Dental — said, ‘I served in these demanding roles simultaneously for more than four years. This was followed by serving as a governor on the New York State Board of Governors.

In all his professional roles, this social leader and joke teller would be breaking down barriers to bring about changes that many take for granted today. During that struggle, Chester’s closest friends became even closer. Rep. Charles Rangel, New York’s longest-serving congressional representative, spoke at his board of governors induction. Keeping in style that evening, Chester drove Rangel home in his Rolls Royce. Another close friend was New York power broker Basil Patterson, known as one of the state’s most influential politicians. Patterson was a close influence and friend who broke bread with us often. Patterson’s son, David, became New York’s first black lieutenant governor and, later, the state’s first black governor.

David Dinkins, New York City’s first black mayor, was another close friend who spoke at the funeral service. When I was president of the New York County Dental Society, I needed a speaker for a children’s oral-health gathering. Without hesitation, Chester had phoned then Mayor Dinkins who smilingly came to the Empire State Building and greeted and spoke with all of the kids — as requested by his friend.

Chester’s greatest achievement was marrying the beautiful Gladys. As I noted at the funeral service, the New York Times wedding announcement — accompanied by a beautiful photo of Gladys — said, ‘Scott’s daughter, Gladys, marries New York dentist.’ Sixty-two years and three grown children later, marrying Gladys remained Chester’s greatest achievement.

He annually helped others earn fellowships, and he understood the importance of the traditions and ceremony marking the achievement. Yet when I presented him with his fellowship in the International Academy for Dental Facial Esthetics, for which honorees are supplied cap and gowns for the ceremony, Chester had to be different. He wore his cap from Howard University. He was that loyal.

Dr. Redhead lived in times that were socially changing, and his tireless work breaking down barriers benefited many who followed. But I never saw him as a black dentist, I saw him only as my friend.