A Tribute to Dr. Sidney Groffman

Our field lost one of the giants of his generation on May 28, 2016, with the passing of Sidney Groffman, OD, MA, FCOVD, FAAO. Sid, as he preferred to be called by his colleagues, was intimately bound with publishing and served as editor of the Journal of Optometric Vision Development, a forerunner of this journal.

In certain circles, Dr. Groffman was best known for his eponymous Groffman Visual Tracings. The original manual that he wrote for this program through Keystone View, a company for which he worked as a field representative earlier in his career, is still available online. Sid once opined that although the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, in life it was more important to trace the path between points that helps orient an individual to navigate toward goals. It seems fitting that his last published editorial was a piece addressing the importance of being oriented properly in space.

Sid's professional interests extended well beyond connecting letters to numbers. In tracing his career path it is clear that he connected many dots and, in most instances, considerably ahead of his time. Consider one of his earlier publications, in the Academy Journal in 1964, on a neuro-visual approach to strabismus which you can read in its entirety online. In 1969, again in the Academy Journal, Dr. Groffman authored an article on operant conditioning and vision training that considerably expanded the mindset of the field. The influence of this paper is evident from the opening of its abstract: “Vision training is concerned with modification of visual behavior. Operant conditioning is a method of behavior modification useful for improving the design of vision training programs and for insuring patient interaction with vision training programs.”

Continuing his trailblazing path in 1971, Sid published a paper in the Academy Journal on the optometric utilization of objective, standardized, perceptual tests that would help define his subsequent role in academia. Joining another prolific friend and didactic partner at SUNY, Drs. Sidney Groffman and Harold Solan would become a team that pioneered in organizing a clinical framework for testing.

Their work culminated in a book published by OEPF, titled Developmental & Perceptual Assessment of Learning-Disabled Children: Theoretical Concepts and Diagnostic Testing. In the 1980s, Dr. Groffman would again innovate through co-authoring several monthly OEP papers to share his contributions on computerized perceptual therapy. These papers were incorporated into a monograph on Computers and Vision Therapy Programs, part of OEP's Introduction to Behavioral Optometry Series. In the 1990s, Sid authored a brilliant book chapter entitled “Consideration of Individual Characteristics and Learning Theory in Vision Therapy”. In supplying review questions at the end of the chapter, Sid utilized the names of his three sons, Elliot, Peter and Laurence, and his wife, Beverly. It was a characteristically clever way of Sid to personalize his writing. In acknowledgement of his excellence in writing and in clinical practice, COVD presented Sid with the A.M. Skeffington Award 1995, followed by the G.N. Getman Award in 1996.

Sid's obituary in the New York Times appeared as follows:

Sidney Groffman, the patriarch of our large wonderful family died on Saturday, May 28. Together with his adored wife, Beverly (nee Wodin), his life was filled with love and pride for his three sons, Elliot, Peter and Laurence, their warmhearted wives, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. He was awarded the highest honors of
the optometric profession, and with his articles, books and computer programs helped hundreds of people live complete and meaningful lives. His commitment to Reform Judaism inspired and enhanced his life. Sid will never be forgotten, he will live in our hearts forever.

Magnanimous with his insights and wisdom, Sid helped shaped the career paths of a multitude of individuals. His significant influence is reflected in comments left online in a Guest Book that accompanied his obituary. A colleague at the State University of New York's College of Optometry (SUNY), Dr. Allen Cohen wrote:

I met Sid in 1965 after graduating from optometry school. He was a lecturer and teacher in a special program to educate doctors of optometry in visual therapy. He was an amazing teacher who taught us to always think “out of the box” so that we can help our patients. He continued to amaze me for over 40 years with his passion and continuing zeal to advance our clinical procedures. He will always be my mentor.

Another colleague from Sid's earlier years, Dr. Arnie Sherman wrote:

Jill & I offer our heartfelt sympathy to Beverly and the entire Groffman family on Sid’s passing. I met Sid in 1964 as a 4th year student at PCO where he lectured on Developmental Vision. This topic was unique since it was not taught at our school. He presented with energy, knowledge, and passion and that evening he became a major influence for me to pursue further study in that area. We were friends and colleagues at SUNY for over 40 years. Often we had opposite views on a number of subjects with heated but friendly discussions. Our fondest memory is having spent quality time with Beverly & Sid in Israel. In particular was our memory of Sid leading the Passover Seder. His Talmudic saying “You save one life you save the whole world” was typical of his professional and personal life. He saved at least 1000 lives. We will always remember him.

Energy. Knowledge. Passion. Those qualities never waned, yet were balanced by a sense of warmth that enveloped all with whom Sid came into contact. Dr. Stuart Rothman wrote:

Sid was a teacher, friend and colleague to me. Sid had a warm inviting personality that let everyone know they were special and meant something to him. He was a serious man whose great gift was that he could also look at things in a light hearted way and always find the humor in every situation. He never took himself too seriously and he didn’t let his ego get in the way of any discussion or relationship. He did great things in optometry and yet he was always willing to listen and learn from others. He was a true mensch. I will certainly miss him.

Dr. Andrea Thau, President of the American Optometric Association wrote:

I want to express my deepest condolences to the Groffman family upon the passing of Dr. Sid Groffman. He was truly a giant in our field. His groundbreaking work in vision therapy, visual perception and learning disabilities not only helped the thousands of patients that he directly cared for but also had an exponential effect by inspiring his students and colleagues, myself among them, to provide this kind of care to our patients. May his family find comfort in their fond memories of Sid. He will be missed but his legacy will live on.

Sid travelled abroad to share the wealth of his knowledge from optometrists around the world. Representing the international community, Dr. Selwyn Super ruminates about one of his favorite colleagues:

Sidney Groffman lived a life of ethos, pathos and logos. He was true to his religion, his family and his profession. He was self-effacing and modest.
My earliest memories of him go back to 1973 when he acted as an examiner for the American Academy of Optometry’s Diplomate section for Binocular Vision and Perception. While he was an accomplished practitioner in both of those fields, and wrote a fair amount to extend optometry’s grasp of perception in general, he served the greater interest of behavioral optometry as the editor of COVD’s journal.

My wife Cynthia and I enjoyed both Sid and Beverly’s company at many of meetings we attended together and when we could schmooze on baking recipes and optometry and psychology we had in common. Our sincere condolences go out to Beverly and all his family.

Importing and adapting principles from psychology and education into optometric vision therapy seemed to come naturally to Sid. Even at the age of 80, he was still innovative in writing about subitizing and its relationship to math, and devising computerized therapy procedures built around the concept. I suspect this is why he inspired so many colleagues who were considerably younger. Here is a further sampling from the New York Times Guest Book:

Dr. Groffman was my teacher, my first employer after I finished my residency and my cherished colleague. He inspired me to reach higher all with his smile and humor. He will be deeply missed but his memory lives on in all those who were fortunate to have known him. – Dr. Ira Krumholtz

Dr. Groffman was a great teacher and an inspiration to me. More than anyone he taught me that people are worth taking a chance on, and sometimes a second, third, and fourth chance. He believed that every young person has a mission in life, and that our job as learned adults is to help him or her achieve that mission. I will miss his twinkling blue eyes and infectious laugh. Please accept my most heartfelt wishes that your grief might be abated by the many happy memories people who cherished Dr. Groffman will be sharing with you. – Dr. Audra Steiner

My thoughts go out to Dr. Groffman’s family and our entire Optometric Community. Dr. Groffman was an amazing teacher and inspiration to all of us he mentored and all of the patients he helped. By teaching and inspiring students and residents I am sure that he touched and helped change thousands of lives. I will always remember his kind eyes and broad smile. He will be missed. – Dr. Lisa Weiss

My heart was saddened to hear of your recent passing Dr. Sidney Groffman … An amazingly intelligent, loving, and wonderful professor and colleague. My life has been truly blessed to know you! You are one of my many precious optometry granddads. – Dr. Esther Han

Sid was an extraordinary, kind, humble, brilliant, humorous soul. What a gift to us all. I am honored to have had the time to interact with him, enjoy his wit and sharp mind, and mostly, to be touched by his gentle encouragement. Saying prayers for an easy transition … Yes, with his guidance as a teacher, he has reached tens of thousands, easily. Love and light on your way. – Dr. Samantha Slotnick

Lastly, an individual from Sid’s era who paralleled his career arc in many ways was Dr. Irwin Suchoff. It is most fitting to conclude this tribute with Irwin’s reflections about Sid’s legacy, which he graciously contributed upon our invitation.

Both the Mr. Know-It-All and the Renaissance Man have expertise in a number of areas.
A major difference is how they use this knowledge. The former seeks to establish himself as the expert by domination. This is most frequently done by talking loudly and long, and interrupting others. There is the presence of anger, an inability to listen to others, a lack of humor and the need to establish his self-importance. The Renaissance Man is the exact opposite.

Dr. Sidney Groffman will be remembered as a Renaissance Man. As befits this type of person, his expertise was wide ranging. A major area was based in his strong belief in God. This formed the foundation for his deep knowledge of Judaism, but extended to an appreciation and understanding of the other major religions. His expertise in optometry and related fields are evidenced by his impressive clinical accomplishments in private practice and at the Vision Therapy and Learning Disability Units at the State University of New York, State College of Optometry. He was a popular and sought after teacher by the College’s students, residents, and colleagues. Sid’s major scholarly ability is featured by his contributions to the optometric and related literature. The number of his published clinical and research journal articles is impressive, as is the diversity of the topics they cover. He was also the invited author for chapters in a number of texts and was co-editor of several clinical books. Dr. Groffman served with distinction as editor-in-chief of a previous version of the present journal.

The above describes several of Sid’s many areas of expertise, but it presents an incomplete picture of the man himself. How he shared his knowledge gives depth to the picture of this Renaissance Man. First and foremost, he was humble, never bragging or seeking the spotlight, although it frequently sought him. When it did, he was always well prepared to clearly and succinctly express his thoughts, but he was never the loudest voice in the room. He was a thorough and respectful listener, even when the speaker presented facts and/or viewpoints that were contrary to Sid’s. I can’t remember a time when he showed anger or frustration, even under circumstances where these emotions could be excused. Indeed, negativity was not in Sid’s repertoire. Rather, his body language and overall demeanor represented a happy person who loved life, but was prepared to effectively cope with its challenges. Not surprisingly he had an excellent sense of humor that went beyond telling stories. Some of his articles bear this out: The Sore Eyes of Samuel Pepys, and TV or Not TV, Is That The Question. And most remarkable is that I never remember Sid being judgmental or critical of anyone, and I can’t think of anyone being judgmental or critical of him. This is perhaps the most defining statement that can be made of a Renaissance Man.

Sid’s passing has been a loss and the cause for sadness for his wife Beverly, their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren, as it has for his extended optometric family. However, knowing and cherishing what he gave to all of us, let’s not dwell on his death; instead, let us celebrate his life.

REFERENCES

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