

“Rewarding Career”

On a Friday afternoon, I was sitting at the Starbucks right in front of New York College of Dentistry. A typical Asian guy with black short hair, wearing scrubs with pens secured to hide its left chest pockets, came in. He smiled at me and sat next to me. He is my friend, Joe Younhyup Byun. I ordered a grande sized of iced Americano for him and we started our conversation. I asked him about his dentistry life. However, his first words were, “Isn’t it boring to just hear about the college life of a successful dentist?” and he continued, “Actually, I used to be a trouble maker.” I thought I knew Joe very well, but I discovered a new side of him.

People might think that Joe is a genius; however, in fact, he is not. He faced a lot of challenges until he came to this position. He took a very different path compared to other dentistry students. Growing up in South Korea, it was difficult for him to prioritize school and achieve good grades with hobbies in sports and drawing. Korean culture emphasizes good grades and high scores and there is a pervasive belief that entry to an elite university guarantees the highest salary and happy life. Due to Korean cultural emphasis on good grades, Joe’s parents were worried that he would lose interest in academics because of his hobbies. After a long discussion, his parents decided to send him to the United States to continue his education where they believed he could receive a more balanced education. However, Joe said, “I really didn’t enjoy my middle school period. I had a language barrier and had to study much more than others. I was so much stressed that I was forced go back to Korea. During that period, I lost interest in studying even more.”

But Joe's parents couldn't allow him live without education. Instead of attending high school, he took high school level exams in Korea and earned a certificate that would enable him to get into college. Having always enjoyed art and drawing, Joe chose to major in graphic design to cultivate his burgeoning artistic talent. At the tender age of sixteen, he started his college life in Abilene, Texas. After successfully completing his first year of college in May 2009, he started regretting the path he had chosen as a graphic design major.

During that summer break, he seized the opportunity to attend a joint medical and dental outreach to Cambodia for the third time with his church and with his father. Joe's father, who is a dentist, has attended their annual church outreach to provide dental care to the underserved populations in countries such as Indonesia, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Yemen, Vietnam, Xianjiang(China), Tajikistan. During youth, Joe could not appreciate the impact of these outreaches; but this time, the outreach made him clear on the career he wanted to pursue for the rest of his life. Observing dentists like his father serving patients during the outreach, relieving them of their toothaches and putting back their smiles, piqued his interest in dentistry. Joe said, "By the end of the trip I was consumed by an exciting thought, and I thought what if I was the one in that position comforting and relieving a person's pain? Despite the fact that I had been on the same outreach for the past eight years, this one turned out to be the most rewarding."

Joe changed his major to Biology during his sophomore year. Although he faced a huge language barrier when he was in middle school, studying Biology was different. Since biology was different from literature, Joe said that he enjoyed memorizing the terms. His hard work and

undeterred enthusiasm for dentistry finally paid off on December 1st, 2011 when he was accepted by the New York University College of Dentistry.

Has anyone ever heard of a dentist who hasn't attended high school? Here is "a youngest (only 24 years old) prospective Endodontist (root canal specialist), Joe Younhyup Byun" who is currently attending his last semester in New York University College of Dentistry. He has completed all other requirements and exams except graduation. In about two months, he will become a "dentist," and not a dental student anymore. Many of his colleagues are now looking for a job. However, Joe already has a plan. He just joined another 2-year specialty resident's program, Advanced Endodontic. Most Endodontic programs accept experienced dentists rather than students. He is the youngest one who has been accepted by the program, not only because he skipped high school, but also because he joined the residency program direct from graduate school without working experience.

Just as his adolescence was troubled, Joe's life in dental school had its share of troubles. Joe was humbled by the hardships he faced during his first two years at NYUCD. After he entered Dentistry, he felt a huge "gap." He found out that most of the students had graduated from famed undergraduate colleges or they had gone through NYU's 7-year Doctorate of Dental Science program. Despite the increasing course loads, Joe became more determined to achieve academic excellence and continue the path to becoming a dentist.

However, Joe said that he was almost kicked out of dentistry because he once helped a clinical classmate to cheat on an exam. One of Joe's clinical friends was struggling at the

moment because of alcohol. She got married during her first year of dentistry, but she found out that her husband was having an affair with someone else. So she couldn't really study and she was unable to take the test. Even though Joe was not supposed to, he ended up helping her copy his answers. Consequently, Joe and his friend were caught and they got into trouble. Joe was commonly known by his colleagues not only for being a troublesome student, but also for being the youngest student in his grade.

By the beginning of his third year, Joe started getting hands-on experience by treating real patients. During the first few months of clinical work, he was attending to many emergency patients from Urgent Care. Some of the emergency patients needed extractions, others needed pulpectomies, which are emergency treatments to remove bacteria from infected nerves. Almost all of the patients were in pain. Interestingly, he never again saw the patients he referred to oral surgery for extractions. In contrast, he still sees many of the patients he started on pulpectomy treatment on a regular basis (for those having no previous provider). He said "Seeing my patients happy and out of pain is the most motivating factor as to why I wanted to specialize in endodontics. Seeing them full of compliments is extremely rewarding."

To satisfy his increasing interest in the field of endodontics, Joe started shadowing in the postgraduate endodontics clinic in order to gain firsthand experience on what it is like being part of the postgraduate endodontics clinic. While still shadowing at the postgraduate endodontics clinic, Joe was able to observe and learn more about various complex procedures. The more he shadowed these postgraduate students, the more he wanted to be in their level and performing

these procedures himself. After discussing with postgraduate endodontic residents and faculty, his decision to apply for the endodontics program solidified. His earlier question of “what if he became the one who can comfort and relieve a person’s pain?” came to be answered. It is here that Joe found that the most satisfying component of dentistry is when one can relieve patients of their dental pain. Consequently, Joe is aware that specializing in endodontics will be the most rewarding step he can take as a dentist.

Around this time last year, Joe commenced preparations for the endodontic program application. Joe said that he wasn’t really expecting to get in because, normally, the acceptance rate is very limited and due to these experienced dentists are more likely to be accepted. However, he wanted to try and prove to the faculty that he was highly interested in joining them. Joe thought that even if he applies for the second time, he will have a higher chance of acceptance. He took time to make his portfolio and had a lot of conversations with professors before submitting his application. At the beginning of the fall, Joe got a letter that he had qualified. Everyone in the dentistry was surprised because he is the youngest student to have ever received acceptance into the program.

It is not only time for preparing but also for applying this season for the next year’s endodontic program. When I asked how he would like to motivate or advise other potential endodontic program applicants, Joe answered, “Although I am not a genius, and even lacking in high school life, I dig into dentistry and I really enjoy it, especially the root canal treatment. It is my belief that endodontists should understand the pain patients go through and should be more

responsible, especially since we treat patients who are really in great pain, rather than aiming for beauty such as laminate veneer. If you get satisfied when patients are happy because they are out of pain, or feel most rewarded when they compliment you, then I believe such an individual is ready to be in the field of endodontic. Moreover, it's advisable for one to shadow and assist postgraduate endodontists because here one will meet a lot of different cases pertaining to dental patients and hence learn from them. Seeing the only patients required by your school it's not enough." Kramer, one of NYUCD's Endodontic Professor, said "I never seen a student who comes to shadow this often. I liked Joe's assiduousness."

Some might think that Joe had wasted time while studying design or he might be lacking something when studying cases because he did not attend high school. However, Joe knew his limits and he had therefore planned for it. Joe said, "My artistic abilities will not go to waste, as it will provide me with the hand-eye coordination required during complex endodontic procedures. Additionally, am very much aware of my weakness. Since I don't have high school knowledge, I lack the feelings or experiences that are only known by high school students. I will try being deeply understanding when I meet adolescent patients." Joe seemed confident and ready to move to the next step.

"I am ready to learn what it takes to become an endodontist and am willing to face every challenge I may encounter as a resident in postgraduate endodontics. Most importantly, my easy-going nature will help me manage anxious patients and my drive to achieve perfection will maximize my treatment success." However, Joe said that he has two concerns in his mind. One

thing he worries about is the fact that he is young (what if patients don't trust him because he is young?) Joe will have only one chance to practice root canal treatment for the next 2-year program. Therefore, he is planning to work or join outreach as a volunteer to take care of other patients. Joe said that he doesn't want to lose his skills in other parts of dentistry and he will not be lazy when it comes to practicing.