

UC San Diego

UC San Diego News Center

By Michelle Brubaker

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Inspirational Campus Leader Battling Stage 4 Cancer Receives One of Dentistry's Highest Honors

Director of Student-Run Free Dental Clinic Project receives national award

When Dr. Irvin Silverstein, director of UCSD's Student-Run Free Dental Clinic Project, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2016, he was told he had just two or three months to live. Now, 58 months later, after several surgeries and aggressive, ongoing treatments at UC San Diego Health, he is being recognized as a recipient of the American Dental Education Association Foundation 2021 William J. Gies Awards for Vision, Innovation and Achievement in the Dental Educator category.



L to R: Donna Silverstein (wife), Sharona Silverstein (daughter), Irvin Silverstein, Sarah Silverstein (daughter). 2015

The awards honor individuals and organizations that exemplify the highest standards in oral health and dental education, research and leadership. Silverstein learned about the award on a particularly challenging day.

“My pain was at a level 8 out of 10 the day I got the call. I was floored. It truly lifted my spirits when I needed it the most,” said Silverstein, voluntary clinical professor in the Department of Family Medicine and Public Health at the University of California San Diego School of Medicine. “I believe I am still alive today because of the work I do. I love teaching, and my students inspire me every day. This award is really about them.”

Silverstein is one of eight Gies awardees this year.

“Through their extraordinary contributions, our Gies awardees are moving the needle forward in dental education and oral health,” said Marsha Pyle, President of the ADEA Gies Foundation. “The Gies Awards honor future-ready initiatives that advance dental education and elevate the dental profession.”

It started in a church basement

The free dental clinics began in 1999, part of the UCSD Student-Run Free Clinic Project, which had launched two years earlier. The first free dental clinic was located in the basement of a church by medical students who saw that their patients were in critical need of dental care.

Student-run Free Dental Clinic Flourishes Under Leadership of Irwin Silverstein

Under Dr. Irwin Silverstein's vision and leadership, the UCSD Student-Run Free Dental Clinic Project has grown to four sites, from families without health care in Lemon Grove, veterans served at Veteran's Village off Pacific Highway and underserved individuals in Pacific Beach and downtown locations.

[Read more about the Student-run Dental Clinic»](#)

“That first clinic was run by volunteers and medical students serving as assistants to the dentists,” said Silverstein, who began working at the UCSD Student-Run Free Dental Clinic Project in 2003. “The dental chair and X-ray unit were so old that they blew out the electricity in the church, forcing it to rewire the electrical system.”

The Free Clinic Project has grown tremendously over the years, providing medical, dental, pharmacy, acupuncture, legal and social services to San Diego's underserved communities. Since the inception of the UCSD Student-Run Free Clinic Project, more than 150,000 clinic visits have taken place. It is now a national model of care.

“The UCSD Student-Run Free Project uses a humanistic, empowering health care model, with the patient at the center,” said Dr. Ellen Beck, founding director of the Student-Run Free Clinic Project at UC San Diego School of Medicine. “It offers care for 20 medical specialties, as well as mental health and social needs.”

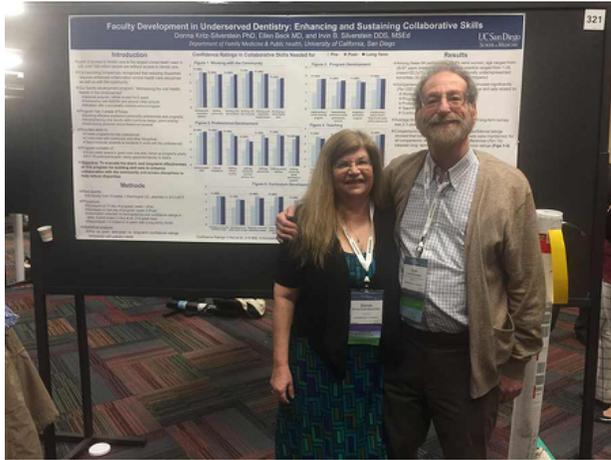
Prescriptions, lab work and related services are available at no charge. More than 95 percent of the patients have chronic conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension, hyperlipidemia, asthma and depression, all requiring ongoing care.

When Silverstein was introduced to the project, dental care was provided only intermittently, and there was no structure to teach pre-dental students about the practice of dentistry.

“Dental care is the greatest unmet health need in the country,” said Silverstein. “What struck me the most about the UCSD Student-Run Free Project and the Student-Run Free Dental Clinic was the enthusiasm in all the students. The clinic had so much potential, but needed a new structure to allow medical and dental services to work together to better serve our community.”

“I knew that there were a lot of people in pain who could not eat, which leads to bad nutrition. Providing dentures, partials and restorations also improves self-esteem and the ability to obtain employment and become a contributing member of society.”

Beck said the clinic reorganized to add dental care, “but Dr. Silverstein’s inspirational leadership transformed our dental services into a remarkable program.”



Dr. Donna and Irvin Silverstein presenting their research poster at the American Dental Educators Association Annual Meeting (2019).

Not only did he revamp the dental clinics, but Silverstein was able to raise funds to rebuild the dental clinics into modern and safe environments. He also persuaded other general and specialty dentists to volunteer time to teach students as they treated clinic patients.

Care includes general dentistry and specialties, such as endodontics, prosthodontics, oral surgery, periodontics, pediatric dentistry and orthodontics.

According to latest data, these clinics have provided more than \$11.5 million of dental care encompassing more than 41,200 patient visits over the past 18 years.

“Dr. Silverstein made it possible for us to serve all of our patients with outstanding dental care, as well as teaching generations of future physicians, dentists and pharmacists about the integration of dental and medical health. He emphasized the importance of the health of the mouth to the health of the body. His passion is legendary and his commitment to social justice unsurpassed,” said Beck.

The lessons of a Holocaust survivor

Silverstein attributes his work ethic, perseverance and passion to help others to his family. His father was a poor immigrant who spent time in an orphanage and was a prisoner of the Israeli War of Independence before the age of 18.

After immigrating to the United States, Silverstein’s father attended college, earned an engineering degree and went into the aerospace industry. He later obtained a Master’s Degree and became manager in a corporate division developing international satellites.

Silverstein’s mother and grandmother survived the Holocaust and Polish concentration camps. After being separated for three years, they too set out on a three-year journey to get to America and start a new life.

“My family’s history taught me how to navigate all of life’s ups and downs,” said Silverstein. “Something I am doing on a daily basis during my cancer journey.”



Photo of students with Donna and Irv at the Annual Meeting of the American Dental Association (ADA). Pictured with us is Dr. James Crawley, Past President of the ADA (4th from left), Sarah Silverstein (5th from left), Donna Silverstein (6th from left), Dr. Kevin Kenny (Clinic Volunteer, 3rd from right) former students who are now dentists (others in the first row) and current Pre-Dental Society members (all in rows 2-5) (2016).

a research project at the San Diego Zoo studying periodontal disease in spider monkeys to show how it mimicked the human condition.

“It was during my time on that project that I realized how beautiful San Diego was and that I wanted to live there.”

Silverstein moved from Los Angeles to San Diego and bought a practice. About a year later, after losing a bet to his aunt, he called a young female professor in Brooklyn. “And the rest, as they say, is history.”

The two married in 1986 after a year of dating and a long-distance relationship.

“We would talk on the phone for hours. We joked that the amount we paid for our phone bills could have easily purchased several plane tickets,” said Donna Kritz-Silverstein, PhD, professor of epidemiology at UC San Diego School of Medicine and the Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health and Human Longevity Science.

Kritz-Silverstein recalled when her husband was first asked to be a guest lecturer for the pre-dental society at UC San Diego.

“My grandmother is the person who has had the biggest influence on my life. She lost everything before coming to America, yet she had a tiny box in her small apartment with money she collected for the poor. I would say to her, ‘Grandma, we are poor. Look at the holes in my clothes, and I do not have any toys.’ She would respond, ‘You have your health, food and shelter. No one is trying to kill us. We aren’t wealthy, but we are definitely not poor.’”

That perspective has had a profound impact on Silverstein. During a career spanning more than four decades, he has made a positive difference in the lives of many – both humans and non-human.

For example, he developed programs that allowed unwed mothers on welfare to receive an education and begin a career in dentistry. He also worked on a

"I asked him when he thought he would be back from the lecture. He told me probably in an hour-and-a half. Seven hours later, he walked through the door. He said the students had so many questions and he stayed to answer every single one. I could see the excitement in his eyes," said Kritz-Silverstein, who now serves as the assistant director of the UCSD Free Dental Clinic Project and as an advisor for the students in the pre-dental society.

Teaching the heart of dentistry

"Some of my proudest moments have come from my work at the dental clinic. I have witnessed a student assist a dentist delivering dentures to a young woman who was brought to tears. It changed the trajectory of the patient's and the student's life," said Silverstein.

"You can teach a person how to do dentistry and take tests, but you also have to show them how to have heart. Students give up so much of their free time to manage and run the clinics and serve as chair-side assistants to the volunteer-dentists. The students also help manage our supplies, obtain donations and learn how to set up our clinics. They travel to conferences and learn about the latest in research and technology. We could not serve the community like we do without them."

Silverstein's work has earned him international recognition, meetings with local government officials and dinner with President Barack Obama.



Photo taken after a Thursday evening meeting with Special Speaker, Dr. Maxine Fineberg, Past President of the American Dental Association, (7th from left). Others in the photo include Dr. Sussi Yamaguchi (Clinic Director, (5th from left), Dr. Irvin Silverstein (6th from left), Dr. Maxine Fineberg (center [7th from left]), Dr. Donna Silverstein (8th from left), Dr. Randy Jungman (Dentist, Clinic volunteer, 6th from right), Dr. Stacey Moon (Dentist, Free Clinic Fellow (5th from right), Pre-Dental Society student leaders (students in front Row), and Pre-Dental Society student members (all in rows 2-4) (2014).



Drs. Donna and Irvin Silverstein at the American Dental Educators Association Annual Meeting (2018).

"We owe Dr. Silverstein a debt of gratitude for the innumerable patients and students that he has served so graciously over the years with the UCSD Student-Run Free Clinic Project and Student-Run Free Dental Clinic," said Dr. David Bazzo, interim chair of the Department of Family Medicine and Public Health. "A true humanitarian educator, he has restored dignity and health to patients with dental issues while providing mentorship, guidance and role modeling with true caring and professional behavior. I cannot think of anyone more deserving of the Gies Award."

Silverstein continues to teach virtually during the pandemic, working between his own medical treatments. Instead of attending weekly, in-person pre-dental society meetings, he and his wife host weekly Zoom meetings with special guests. The meetings are attended by approximately 120 students.

“At UC San Diego where we do not have a school of dentistry, Dr. Silverstein has been the champion, mentor and example for our pre-dental students,” said Dr. David Brenner, vice chancellor, UC San Diego Health Sciences. “He has made amazing contributions to the education of our students. I cannot imagine anyone more deserving of this prestigious educational award.”

When not working, the father of two daughters enjoys spending time with this family.

“One of our daughters, Sarah, is a pediatric dentist who has also gone on several outreach mission trips with me and volunteers in the Free Dental Clinics. The other daughter, Sharona, is in education and works in a college writing center, but makes time to help coordinate the yearly Pre-Dental Society food drive and distribution around the holidays. They are both selfless individuals who give to our community in different ways.

“I am beyond grateful to be honored with the Gies Award, but my family and the success of my students are my greatest accomplishments. I hope that my students will be able to pay it forward to make this world a better place.”

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