

Guest Editorial ▶ Irwin Suchoff, a Mensch's Mensch

Paul A. Harris, OD, Southern College of Optometry, Memphis, Tennessee

“Mensch” – a person of integrity and honor

On March 21, 2018, the world lost a great man, Dr. Irwin B. Suchoff, a man who did what he did for others. He brought out the best in those around him. He bettered the



lives of all he touched and all they touched throughout their lives. To many, he was a particular person or served a particular role in their lives and development, which was key to their development at that time. Most had no idea the number of different hats he wore or the varied roles he played over his illustrious career.

Irwin was a clinician, teacher, mentor, researcher, writer, editor, administrator, and so much more. Most of all, Irwin was inquisitive; he wanted to understand. Throughout the learning process, he stopped and took time to write and publish so that others could be part of his journey. As his knowledge base grew and the number of individuals he shared with expanded, their combined growth was synergistic in nature. He stated, “My patients, particularly the special populations I worked with, taught me about vision.” And, “My publication showed my life.”

He became an optometrist due to a question that came to him early in life. He pursued the answer his entire career. The question essentially was, Why do all the diagrams of vision start with arrows showing light going into the eye, into the system, but what we perceive are objects out there in space? Yes, it also took a chance meeting with Second Lieutenant Norman Haffner at an Army hospital in Europe, while serving in the Army himself as a pharmacist involved with supply lines, to turn his interest into reality.

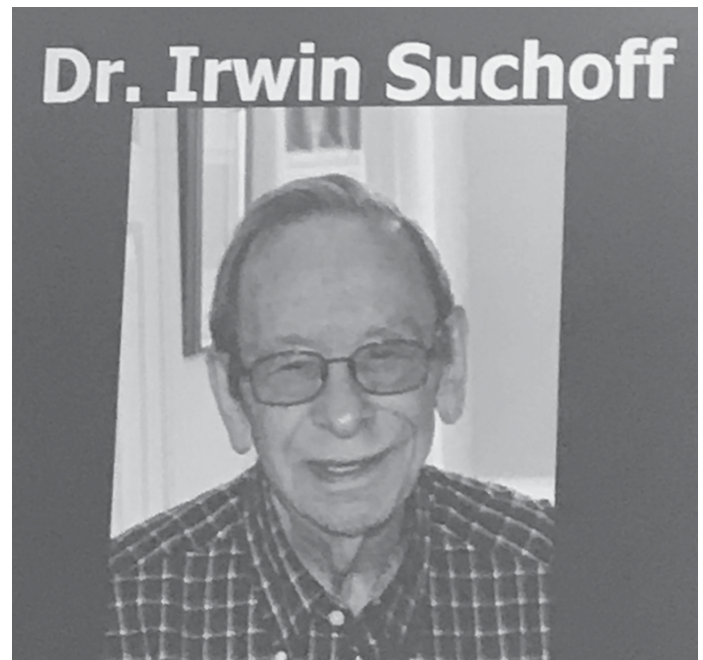
Irwin got his BS from the Massachusetts College of Optometry in 1959 and his OD degree a year later. He then came to the New York area and began working for Dr. Haffner at the Optometric Center of New York (OCNY) part time. At the time that Dr. Harold Solan made a shift from the Bronx to New Jersey, Irwin partnered up with Dr. Dick Kavner to buy the practice in the Bronx. As Irwin tells it, he and Dick met with Harold at 9:00 AM and decided on the spot to buy the practice. As they were leaving, they ran into Dr. Harold “Hal” Friedman, who had a 10:00 AM appointment and who never got a chance to make an offer on the practice. Well, Dick and Irwin involved Hal in the practice, and Irwin credited him not only with teaching them how to run the practice but also

with a different way to do VT, aimed at results, changes in behavior. They practiced together for 12 years.

Irwin cited his time at OCNY as a magic time. He worked for 7-8 hours once a week in the VT clinic with Dr. Marty Birnbaum for years. He also did perceptual evaluations at the St. Joseph's School for the Deaf, which was a great learning experience for him. As OCNY was maturing, Norman asked Irwin to begin teaching some courses on child development and vision development. Well, in typical Irwin style, as he learned he wrote, and this led to one of his first publications, which became a textbook for his class at SUNY.

Irwin came on full time as SUNY was forming as a college of optometry in 1971. Unknown to many of his students and colleagues, throughout his time at SUNY, he continued to see patients a minimum of one day a week in private practice. During his time at SUNY, he was involved with the summer internship program. This program was so highly regarded that he helped to establish a 3-month post-graduate program at first. This didn't last long, though. Because of the positive experiences had by all, he went to Norman with the idea of expanding the program to become a one-year residency. Norman agreed but told Irwin that they needed to have four positions to make the program fly. The SUNY program is now called the Dr. Irwin B. Suchoff Residency in Vision Therapy and Rehabilitation.

This led to a new page in Irwin's dedication to the profession and to those it serves. He began a long involvement with the ACOE. At first, he assisted in the accreditation of residencies and eventually served to accredit optometry school programs in North America.



Irwin stated, “I worked with dedicated persons who gave of themselves, unbelievably in terms of how much they gave.” Those who knew Irwin frequently said the same thing of him. How could one man give so much? But he did, and he wasn’t finished, not by a long shot.

In 1990, he became the founding editor of the Journal of Behavioral Optometry (JBO), published by the Optometric Extension Program Foundation (OEPF). He was the editor in chief for 17 years. All articles and editorials from these journals are online at <http://oepf.org/journals>. This depository of knowledge is a treasure for all optometrists. Irwin had a vision, and he brought it to reality through the JBO. He wanted the articles to be more clinical in nature. Irwin, rather than just managing the publication, served as what he called a developmental editor. He worked closely with authors who he deemed to have a message to deliver to the world, but who had not perfected the ability to communicate through writing. Irwin would work the piece, and through extensive back-and-forths with the author, help them find their voice.

The last 15 years of his time at SUNY and in practice was devoted exclusively to working with patients with head

trauma, as he liked to call it. He taught for many years an Applied Concepts course for COVID with Dr. Allen Cohen, which helped many optometrists to enter the field and have the tools necessary to help those patients who had suffered a head trauma. Again, he took to the pen and authored or co-authored several landmark publications that are still relevant today.

Two lighter notes. In the early days, Dick Kavner, also known according to Irwin as “Cha Cha” Kavner, was a dance teacher. One day, several other dance teachers called in sick, and Dick reached out to Irwin and asked for his assistance as a dance instructor. We all would have loved to have been a fly on the wall that day in the dance studio. Also, many who will read this know the one and only Bubba, Dr. Glen Steele. Most I am sure think that the moniker Bubba must have come from something early in Glen’s childhood, but no. It was Irwin who first called Glen “Bubba,” and boy oh boy, has it stuck.

Irwin inspired many. He never sought recognition. He was recognized by others. Irwin, thank you for all you have done. This profession and this world are better for having had you, the mensch you were and will continue to be in our minds.

