

In the Beginning

By Wilma F. Bergfeld, MD

One day as young staff at the Cleveland Clinic, I was riding in the elevator with a senior physician. We were exchanging pleasantries when he abruptly said, “You know, the Board of Governors thought of putting you on one of its committees, but we decided that because you are married and have two children you should be home with your family.”

As vivid as that remark still is, some 40 years later, I wouldn’t say it ignited a fire. Rather, it smoldered for several years until the time that Walter B. Shelley - looking over an AAD annual meeting program – noted the dearth of women in key roles. He suggested to Miriam Reed that she assemble the women dermatologists to discuss their minor participation in the meeting and perhaps the need for a women’s society.

The first gathering, of about 60 women, took place at an AAD meeting more than 35 years ago. Up to that point several of us had been getting together at annual teas hosted by senior female dermatologists, but on that day Miriam challenged the women to do something about their meager visibility, lack of leadership positions and minimal faculty appointments at the annual meeting. Several women responded that it would be detrimental to form a society because our male colleagues would feel threatened and we would stir a backlash. These women were already well connected and did not need a helping hand.

That’s when the smoldering fire became a blaze. “How can you say that?” I demanded. “Have you counted the number of women presenting at this meeting? We are so few that we meet and talk to each other only in the bathroom. Do you even know the woman sitting next to you?”

There was a buzz in the room. A fervor. That day, the Women’s Dermatologic Society was formed – and because I had been an outspoken advocate, I had no escape from being tapped as the first president.

One of my first acts was forming a board of stellar leaders, which included Walter B. Shelley, with the intent of positioning women dermatologists more prominently at the annual AAD meeting. I arranged a meeting with Brad Claxton, the Academy’s executive director, to get his advice, and in one year we increased our participation by more than 30 percent – leading to expanded participation ever since.

Consistently, we have made other strides. After several luncheon meetings that we paid for ourselves, we successfully approached pharmaceutical companies about sponsoring the popular Annual Luncheon we held each Sunday of the Academy meeting. Around the same time, the WDS leadership noted several pharmaceutical displays that degraded women. One large display portrayed a nude woman stepping out of a pond. Our outcry had an immediate effect on future meeting exhibits.

Despite the progress the WDS was making, no one really wanted to take over the leadership reins, so I served as president for seven years. Meanwhile, my husband, a surgeon, warned me that my actions could be unpopular and that “they are gonna get you,” meaning the men, of course. I told him that I had to do this and that I was willing to risk the consequences. The flame from the elevator remark was still lit.

In time, and with gradual, non-threatening activities, the WDS expanded from networking to leadership training, mentoring and outreach – always incorporating women’s and family issues as our niche. And since the beginning, men have served on our board while their membership has steadily grown. Their presence and advice have helped propel our success.

As we grew, I was frequently asked to submit names of women to serve on AAD committees, government and industry committees, and advisory boards. I selected women who were highly capable and would be at the table for the discussion. Because of my position, I never submitted my own name. Then one time a government recruiter filling the Cosmetic Ingredient Review panel scanned my list and said, "How about you? You're not on the list and I want you." That resulted in my going to Washington to meet with preeminent toxicologists and other scientists to investigate the safety of chemical ingredients in cosmetics. I have now served on the panel over 38 years – more than 20 as chair. So an extraordinarily rewarding dimension was added to my own career because of the WDS.

As I reflect on those embryonic years, I have to laugh at our initial board meetings, which were frenetic, purposeful and passionate. Most of the clerical work was done by the secretary and president. Today, as we approach 2,000 members, we employ a full-time executive and administrative team to support our complex organization. With each leadership team and president, the WDS has matured, and many of our activities serve as models for other dermatology and physician groups. Our achievements are far beyond anything that I could have imagined. Congratulations, WDS!

A founding president of any organization can easily get too much credit. I happened to be in the right place at the right time with the passion to make a difference. Moreover, devotion to WDS has hardly been a selfless act. When you team up with your WDS peers on a project, bonding, networking and friendships result. To this day, I leave each large or small meeting feeling inspired by the fire and purpose expressed by our members – a fire to realize their own potential while giving all they can to their families, their patients, their communities...and WDS.