



INSIDE THE MIND OF WILLI GELLER, MDT—PART 1

Willi Geller, MDT (Zurich, Switzerland), is known around the world as a master in the dental industry. His philosophies extend beyond those about technical excellence; in this interview he shares candidly with one of his students, Pinhas Adar, CDT (Atlanta, GA), about his learning path, his inspirations, and his thoughts regarding the dentist-ceramist relationship.

Mr. Geller will be presenting at the 27th Annual AACD Scientific Session in Boston, Massachusetts, May 18-21, 2011. Save the date and register online today at AACD.com.

PA: *Willi Geller is one of the most innovative and respected dental ceramists in the world. Most people already know that he led the industry with his skills in mimicking the natural dentition in ceramic. But what some might not be aware of is that technicians initially were not very respected in the field of dentistry. Willi was the one who actually changed that mindset. He paved the way for the rest of us in this profession, so that technicians have an equal partnership with other professionals in the business; we just have different careers in the same field. It has been an incredible experience to have Willi as a mentor and a friend, because he had to fight so hard at the beginning to make so many things possible for us today.*

Many people who teach about natural-looking ceramics or interproximal space closure might take these things for granted. But someone actually had to fight for these things to become the norm. Willi is very passionate about what he knows is right; because of that, closing the interproximal spaces is the standard in dentistry.

PA: *Willi, could you please describe your own path of learning, from the beginning?*

WG: *First of all, I truly love my profession. There are people who assess what I do, and call it "quality" or "beautiful." However, at the beginning of my career, someone employed me. My colleagues would come to me and have questions about how to do some*



Willi Geller, MDT, with former student Pinhas Adar, CDT

of the things that I was doing and I would show them. That was the start of my teaching career—it was purely by accident.

Many things that I have tried did not quite work out, but nobody knows about those things. I am naïve by nature, and enjoy doing things that I have no experience in. So, when I have an idea or realize that something is necessary, I just do it. It is like a child who touches a hot oven and only then knows that he will get burned. In this way, positive solutions are what are left. That's my natural way, which is what I am comfortable with. I'm not as educated or as smart as people think—maybe I just try more things. I also like taking risks.

PA: *So, what would you suggest to other people to help them keep an open mind?*

WG: To suggest to other people is very difficult, because each one has their own nature and personality. Some can improve a lot by learning from other people, but others are different, so they should do it their own way, the way that feels right for them.

PA: *What influenced and inspired you along your path?*

WG: I came from a very wonderful family and had very good parents. And throughout my life I was always lucky to meet more wonderful people. I lean on that. I love people. That is the influence that I have had in my career.

PA: *Where does your continued inspiration come from? When*

you get up every morning, what drives you?

WG: Life itself is my inspiration; life is the motive for everything. I do not force ideas to come to me, they just do. I understand today more than I did before. The Far Eastern philosophy is to “empty” your head; if you do that and don't over-think things and don't become stuck in your thinking, you make room for intuition and the ability to learn. I meditate a lot, which helps to do that. Our minds, our bodies are full of garbage. We should cleanse our bodies, our minds, our spirits.

PA: *So, what you are saying is that we can learn new concepts and/or principles more easily if we are open-minded and don't get stuck with our old ideas. Is that correct?*

I always did what I wanted. That's also what I recommend to young people. They have nothing to lose, only to gain, but they should go their own way.

WG: Yes. If you always cook at home and never try other food, you might cook very badly, but you will never know. You only know when you have comparison.

PA: *Do you think that becoming a master ceramist is something that can be learned, or do you think it is an innate ability to see and to be able to visualize?*

WG: I think it is easier when you are born with some ability,

but you can also learn from others. Interesting, stimulating people can always inspire you. Esthetics is something that you either recognize or you don't.

PA: *What do you feel defines “artistry”? Is it the shape of the teeth, or the color? What do you think is the most crucial part of artistry in dentistry?*

WG: When the color is wrong or the shape is off it makes our job harder but I think, in general, shape is more important than color.

PA: *Shape is definitely something that people can learn easier than color, because color is subjective. Do you agree?*

WG: Yes. Even people who are not very artistic can learn geometric forms.

PA: *What, in your opinion, makes a great ceramist? And how can dentists find out, in advance, if someone is the right fit for them?*

WG: I think they must try each other out. That's the only way. Some people might be very good professionals—both the dentist and technician, but sometimes they do not work well together.

PA: *It is almost like a marriage, basically.*

WG: The tragic thing is that they depend on each other like married people do. They work together every day, and the “everyday routine” is not always easy for everyone.

PA: *What do you think is the secret of forming a great dentist-ceramist partnership?*

WG: You have to have a common language and be open-minded

without letting egos get in the way of that partnership. I think ego is the biggest obstacle that most professionals experience and that makes them become unwilling to learn and grow together. We need to be honest and straight with each other. Communication is a cultural aspect and a very strong one. I go to Asia often, and have seen that Asian people communicate very differently from the way we do. I always say that we are an arguing society. We argue with each other, and say bad things to and about each other, and then leave the other person with all that negativity. The only way that situation can be good is if you learn something from it. But we should fight fairly for our



opinions and understand that each person has their own perspective on things.

- PA:** *Maybe 20 years ago, when I first came to the United States, I had some challenges with arguments and respect and other work relationship issues. I remember that you gave me some very sound advice. You said, "Pinhas, if it's worth fighting for, fight for it." Now, let's talk about materials. You were instrumental in developing both the philoso-*

phies and the concepts for a lot of materials. When you worked with the Vita Company, you came up with the opacious dentin concept as well as other different products. Now you have your Creation ceramic line, which has incredible optical properties. Is there an aspect lacking in today's available materials that you still want to see produced?

- WG:** We have a lot of materials and can do many things with them, but then we get to the limit, and need another material to help us to achieve our artistry in dentistry. So it is and will always be a work in progress for materials.
- PA:** *Do you have any favorite restoration type for single teeth or multiple teeth?*



- WG:** I personally do a lot of metal ceramic, over 90% for crowns and bridges. I do a lot of all-ceramics for singles or partial restorations, and sometimes zirconium is very nice. I decide what type of materials I will use for each case; the dentist can request a certain type of material, but in the end, I determine what will be the best for the case.

- PA:** *The true structure and actual case dictates what product*

you're comfortable with. Is that correct?

- WG:** Yes, and a lot is dependent on the mechanics and stability of the patient's function. It is not good when someone says that they do everything with one technique or one material. You have to know what are the best materials and techniques available for the particular case and patient.
- PA:** *I agree. Now, let me ask what people always ask me about you: Do you have any background in art, such as painting or sculpting?*
- WG:** Yes, I do. But I am not good at painting because it is two-dimensional. I like to sculpt a lot. However, when I opened my own lab, I had to stop sculpting, because it's very



time-consuming. So, I started to collect sculpture instead. I also collect other forms of art. My experience with artists is that they are very intolerant, because they are interested only in their own work, whereas collectors can have many different works of art from many different artists.

- PA:** *Have you done intensive studies of natural tooth form and structure to be able to create beautiful lifelike restorations?*

WG: Yes, I learned from nature, as we all should, and I continue to do so. More than 40 years ago when I was working as a technician in a laboratory, one of my friends came to me, looked at my work, and said, "This is a typical Willi crown." I will never forget that; I did not like that statement. I don't want my work to look like "typical Willi"—I want it to look like nature. I constantly observe nature so that I can continue to learn from it and make my work better. Artistry is about creativity.

PA: *What is the key ingredient or information that you need from your dentist to create the proper communication? I know that you see patients as well, but if you have not seen*

the products have improved, and they have fluorescence and everything else that we need, so what is your secret to creating the lifelike vitality of a natural tooth?

WG: You must have a goal in mind, you need to know what you desire, and what you want to achieve. You should also know the material that you are using very, very well. Stay with the material until you can achieve the best results possible with it.

PA: *In other words, the key is to master the product you use so that it will be as good as it can be.*

WG: Yes—you have to know the product that is in your hand.

PA: *Besides dentistry, what are you passionate about? What is it*

WG: It is extremely unfortunate, but our profession is not very well compensated, especially if someone else employs you. Our work is hard and it is stressful. We must have more educated people and better compensation in order for this industry to grow. If someone has a really good education, they normally don't join our profession because of the low compensation. It is also hard to encourage people to get into our industry because of this.

PA: *Yes, it is a hard profession. My path wasn't that easy, and I know that yours wasn't either, because you were the one who actually changed things for us. The AACD is the only academy that actually embraces labora-*



the patient, what is it that you require?

WG: It's always good to have photographs with relaxed lips, one smiling, and a big smile; as well as intraoral photos and a full-face photo, either relaxed or smiling.

PA: *Do you also communicate via video?*

WG: A little. E-mails have made it much easier to communicate.

PA: *You were the first to mix stains and modifiers to create three-dimensional ceramics. Now*

that you love in life?

WG: I always have an eye on art. I also have a passion for sailing and I love people. I really love meeting and spending time with new people.

PA: *Dental laboratories and dental ceramics seem to be "fading away" in some countries, especially in the U.S. and Europe. What can the industry do to excite new people, "new blood," into pursuing a career in dental ceramics?*

tory people and respects how we work together with dentists to reach a common goal. Instead of just talking about it, the AACD actively supports people in coming together to network and talk, and build relationships. That's how we try to encourage people to join the profession.

WG: We do have some young ambitious people who are very good. We also have many young people in the Oral Design Group. They want to grow, and we should let them.

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They also want to present on stage. Because my time is very limited and I cannot always do that, it is very good that these young people want to share their knowledge.

PA: *The Oral Design Group, of which I'm proud to be a member, just celebrated its 25th anniversary in Switzerland. Can you tell readers something more about Oral Design?*

WG: I did not create the Oral Design Group; it was created by every single member we have. Each member contributes his or her ability, and not just in dental ceramics. I remember in particular Mark Anderson, who passed away, was not the greatest ceramist, but he was an exceptional teacher—I never saw a teacher like him. He was unbelievably good at getting other people excited about the profession.

Each member of the group has unique and powerful abilities. But that's not enough—we all respect each other's abilities, and do not try to get the other members to think in only one way. We are all open minded; this is amazing in such a big group. Each member knows what to do, and the steps necessary to get there; it is wonderful. I always say that we may be the best group in the world. Not each of us individually, but collectively.

PA: *What was the major turning point in your career that allowed you to do what you do now?*

WG: I always did what I wanted. That's also what I recommend to young people. They have nothing to lose, only to gain, but they should go their own way.

My generation changed the world, but what worries me about young people today is that they are too addicted to the things that they have... and seem to be afraid of the things that they have never had. Freedom is the true way to happiness and success.

In the next issue of the Journal of Cosmetic Dentistry, Mr. Geller shares more about his views on materials, the future role of laboratory technicians, and offshore laboratories. He also discusses his definition of "esthetics," the future and business aspects of esthetic and restorative dentistry, and what gives him professional satisfaction.

Black-and-white portraits courtesy of Mr. Sascha Hein (Perth, Western Australia).

