

VT:

Good for the Soul; Good for Business



Dr. Hellerstein and a patient.



Dr. Hellerstein

Lynn Hellerstein, O.D., FCOVD, F.A.A.O., learned early that there is more to vision than 20/20 eyesight. As a girl, she says, "I was a good student and a good athlete, but I couldn't read comfortably or for a long period of time. I was quite symptomatic when studying. My father, Harold Fishman, O.D., had prescribed reading glasses, but the visual difficulties persisted even through optometry school. I became interested very early in functional/behavioral optometry—to address those visual problems beyond refraction," she says.


After graduating from Pacific University College of Optometry, she became Colorado's third woman O.D. She joined her father's practice and started another in Denver, with an emphasis in vision therapy (VT). "My father loved vision therapy and he loved children, but he just never provided vision therapy for his patients. I had a passion for it," she says, and she became one of the country's leaders in vision development. Dr. Hellerstein's term as president of the College of Optometrists in Vision Development just ended.

Having been just one of six women in a class of 69 students, Dr. Hellerstein says the gender shift in optometry is amazing—and it is particularly pronounced in vision therapy. "I've found that we can teach the VT techniques to optometric students, but the student has to be comfortable around and love children," she says. VT is a growing area due to various factors including public relations awareness and a trend toward the public seeking alternative treatments. The

increase may coincide with the increased number of women O.D.s because "vision therapy is right up their alley because of their naturally nurturing ways," she says.

Dr. Hellerstein has a partner, two associate O.D.s and four vision therapists. Her sister, Beth Fishman-McCaffrey, OTR, COVT, an occupational therapist, also works there. About 100 therapy patients per week cycle through the practice. Schools, educators, psychologists, physicians or other O.D.s refer patients for vision therapy—and a number of them are children of patients she worked with years ago.

"I never advertised or tried to force myself into schools," she says. But she would offer to do in-service sessions for local schools, which eventually led from 45-minute PTO-type sessions to two-day seminars for national groups. She also regularly offers in-office seminars on various vision and learning issues, attended by several dozen parents or teachers.

The rewards and benefits from a successful vision therapy program warms the hearts of not only the patients and parents, but also of the O.D. and therapists, Dr. Hellerstein says. "We see such a difference in these children over the course of their therapy," she says. And patients and their parents acknowledge it, too. "I'll run into a parent of a previous patient, years later, who proudly tells me that Johnny just graduated from college, and reminds me that Johnny couldn't read in third grade—until we were able to help him." 

Dr. Hellerstein with her husband and two daughters at her inauguration as COVD president.



Hindsight: Success Has Its Price

Dr. Lynn Hellerstein used to think she could do it all. A mother of two girls, she was creating a national reputation for herself and building a highly successful practice—and was still able to make it to most of the important events in her daughter's lives.

She developed her own practice specifically so she could craft her own schedule and take time off during school vacations without having to request or explain it, she says. She has a couch in one room so that she—and now her associates—can bring their non-contagious sick children to work, if necessary.

"Then I developed some major health problems several years ago which made me look at my life. I would see that while I was handling it, I was paying a heavy price," she says. In retrospect, "I see the toll of being a workaholic more on me than on my children." Her daughters have both launched their own careers—one as a graphic designer and one in the field of nutrition and psychology.

Dr. Hellerstein says she feels conflicted when she meets younger O.D.s—men and women. "The new generation has a whole different attitude toward work. They want the respect and financial benefits, but they want more balance in their lives. Two thoughts run through my head almost simultaneously: 'Who do you think you are, as you haven't paid your dues?' and 'How did you get so wise so young to create balance in your life?'"

That attitude shift will become even more prevalent, she predicts. "The whole work environment needs to transform. The demands of most professional fields, including optometry, aren't conducive to people balancing their lives and raising children," she says. Her advice to young O.D.s is to learn to "let go"—a hard lesson for self-described control freaks. "When I'm gone or when I was ill, the practice carried on without me. I had to learn to trust staff. Collaboration, working as a community and empowering others is very important in building a successful practice and life," she says. "I am blessed and have such gratitude for my family and my colleagues."