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DR. TODD CHRISTY: Meet Your 2024-25 MDA President

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Photos by Dave Trumpie

INTERVIEW:

DR. TODD CHRISTY

Meet Your 2024-25 MDA President

Todd Christy, DDS, became Michigan Dental Association president on April 20 at the close of the 2024 MDA House of Delegates in Lansing. Although this is a new assignment, Christy is hardly new to the MDA. He has served as an MDA trustee, as MDA secretary, as speaker of the House of Delegates, as a member of the MDA Insurance & Financial Group Board, on the ADA 9th District delegation, and most recently as MDA president-elect. He also chaired last year's Executive Director Search Committee.

Christy practices general dentistry in Berrien Springs and St. Joseph, in southwest Michigan. He brings to the MDA leadership the perspective of a practicing dentist in a beautiful and sometimes overlooked area of the state near the shores of Lake Michigan. He is a 1996 graduate of the University of Mercy School of Dentistry, though he will always be a lifelong Spartan, having graduated from MSU in 1992 with a bachelor's degree in microbiology. He and his wife Beth have two sons — Will, who just graduated from Michigan State, and Drew, currently attending MSU.

Here are some questions and answers to help you get to know our new MDA president a little better.

(Continued on Page 34)

Journal: What are your hopes for the MDA as you begin your year as MDA president?

Christy: I'm excited for the coming year ahead for the Michigan Dental Association, and filled with hope for what we can accomplish together.

I'm excited for our members to meet and collaborate with our new executive director, John Tramontana. John brings his own unique perspective on leadership from his vast experience that will serve our members and lead our incredible team in Okemos. I'm so thrilled that I get to work closely with him and travel around the state over the coming year to help him connect with our members.

I know that there will be challenges that our MDA will face. Every year there is something that tests our collective resolve and makes us adjust the sails on our course. I believe in our newly seated Board members, too, and cannot wait to work and lead our association with them.

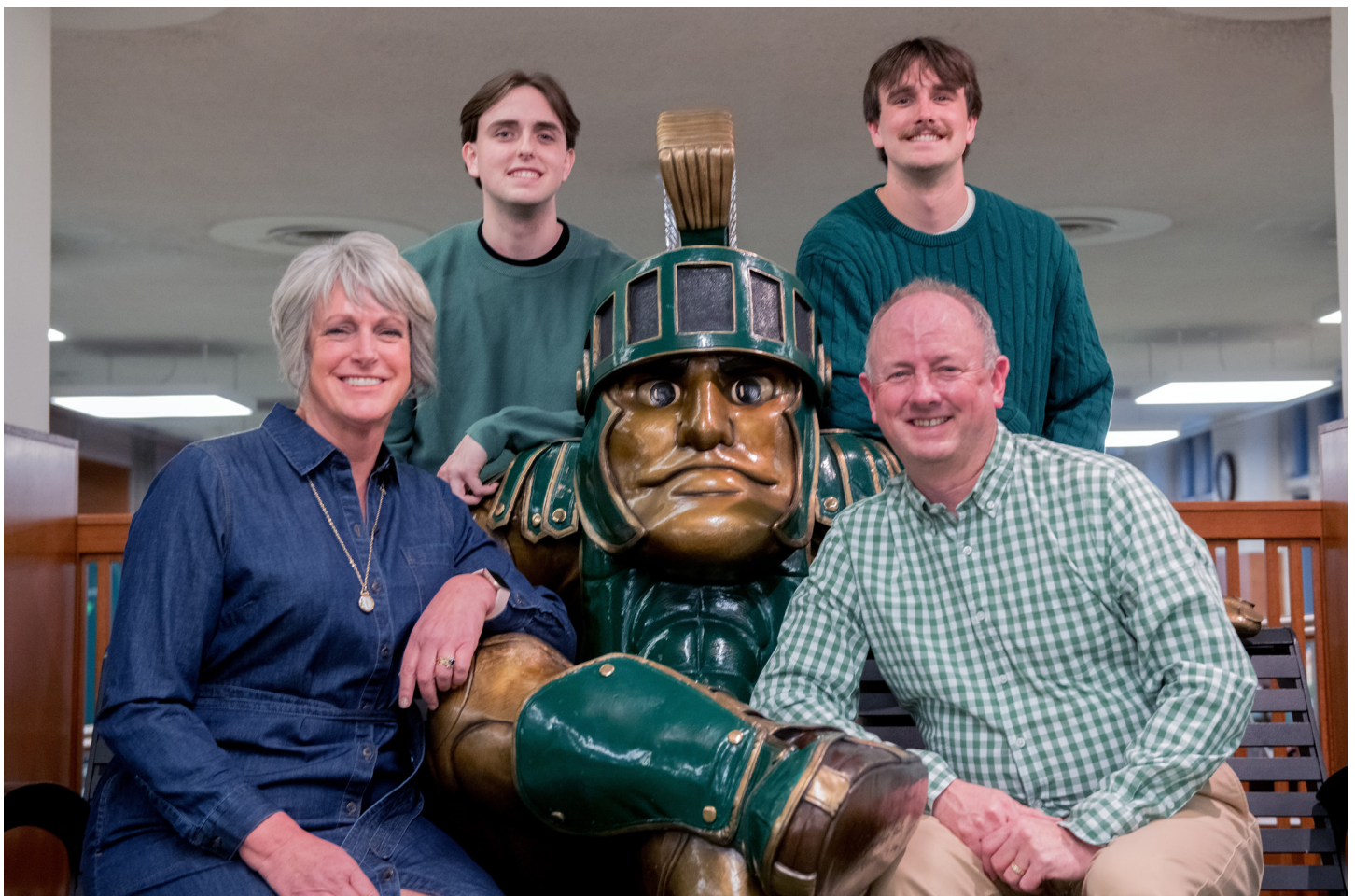
Journal: So what do you see as the biggest challenges facing Michigan dentistry in 2024?

Christy: I think the biggest challenges facing the practice of dentistry in Michigan are workforce shortage, practice and profession profitability, and lastly, the difficulty in selling practices at retirement. These are

nothing new to dentistry. The past four years, though, have exacerbated the challenges, with the large amount of team members leaving the workforce, the increased costs of materials, and dental benefit company reimbursements not keeping up with the increasing inflation — to name a few of the big problems.

Journal: What do you see as the most pressing issues today, strictly in terms of MDA legislative and governmental advocacy?

Christy: Our MDA Committee on Governmental Issues and Affairs works diligently at setting our MDA priorities every year. I agree com-



State's great — Both Todd Christy and wife Beth are Michigan State alumni. They're pictured here in the Union building on campus along with son Will (right), who graduated last month, and son Drew (left) who is currently attending MSU.

pletely with what our MDA priorities are this year — establishing effective dental loss ratio legislation, ensuring assignment of benefits, fixing the situation with virtual credit card payments, increasing Medicaid anesthesia reimbursement, doing something to help relieve the student debt crisis, and making some inroads on the workforce shortage. Every dental practice type in Michigan is affected by at least one of those issues.

Journal: *Very true.*

Christy: Let me focus on a couple of them. On assignment of benefits, every day our MDA team hears of the difficulties patients and dentists face with dealing with dental plans. More than 20 other states have assignment of benefit laws in place to ensure that patients could always access the maximum benefit of their plan and see their dentist regardless of the dentist-insurer relationship. But any legislation here in Michigan has to do what it is intended to do, and so we're working very carefully to make sure that happens.

The student debt crisis is still continuing to be a challenge, with the staggering amounts being accumulated through dental school. We know this can have impact on where new graduates practice, how they practice, and who they treat. Finding ways to curb student debt and bring some relief would be a great help to young dentists, as well as increasing access to dental care by giving them more choices in terms of where to practice as well as their practice settings.

Journal: *There's been discussion recently about health equity – dental health equity. Realistically, is there much that the MDA can do to promote better dental health and to ensure that more Michigan citizens have access to oral health care? Is this a national issue, or a local issue?*



In the office — Christy and his practice partner Dr. Eric Balsis confer at their office in Berrien Springs. They also practice in nearby St. Joseph.

Christy: It's a national issue and a statewide issue and a local issue. I think what the MDA can do to promote dental health equity is in educating the public about the need for dental care, and then working with our state officials to make sure we maintain funding for things like Healthy Kids Dental and Adult Dental Medicaid, as well as our Donated Dental Services program. It was the MDA that pressed hard to get Healthy Kids Dental expanded across the state, and we've made a lot of progress with Medicaid too. And of course the MDA and Michigan dentists are constantly doing volunteer service in underserved communities, from the Michigan Mission of Mercy, to local programs, or things like the Victors for Veterans program through U of M. There's a lot we can do, and have done, but there's always more to do. The MDA also works closely with a number of advocacy groups to give our input, suggestions, and support.

Journal: *Workforce issues continue to be top-of-the-mind for many of our mem-*

bers, specifically the need for more registered dental hygienists and registered dental assistants in the workplace. It seems like there are many factors involved here — changing demographics, pay relative to the positions, lack of accredited schools, changing expectations of those in the workforce. What are your thoughts on this?

Christy: Every one of those issues is a part of the challenge with workforce. I think that the high number of retirements and people leaving the dental field to pursue other careers during the period from 2020 into 2021 had the greatest effect on the workforce situation. This loss of workforce was not able to be overcome by the number of hygienists and assistants coming from accredited programs in the state. And since then, we've had an increase in educational opportunities for dental assistants in particular, but the challenge is these programs are typically based in urban areas, which don't suit the needs of dental practices elsewhere in the state.

(Continued on Page 36)

Our workforce is getting smaller, and it's aging. This is a national trend, not just in dentistry. So we have to be aware of that. But, practices need to better understand how to communicate with this next generation coming into the workforce. We have to appeal to them and show them that being part of a dental office is a great career. The dynamic of potentially having four different generations in one office can create strife and consternation for sure, but that can happen even with a practice of five all the same age. That being said, I think that acknowledging and relishing our generational differences, as we try to do in my practice, can create a unique opportunity to succeed together.

Journal: Another problem continues to be the declining number of dentists in smaller towns and rural areas. Some longtime practices are closing, without a buyer. Is that a problem in southwest Michigan? Are there any solutions?

Christy: I've seen this play out with practices in Berrien County closing with no buyer, and in one case

where no attempt was made to even find a buyer. It's disappointing because these practices I know of were once vibrant and thriving, but with time had diminished. It's one reason why in our 28-year-old practice we continue to invest in technology and our team to stay up on the practice of dentistry. You have to keep current, keep building. You can't let a practice decay or run downhill. That's one solution to start with. Another solution to the problem is being involved in your local dental society and get to know the other dentists in your area. You never know who might have a contact or who may be looking to join or purchase a practice. And then a third solution is to check in with opportunities to network with the dental schools. I had the pleasure of going to the ADA Dentist and Student Lobby Day in Washington, D.C., last year. I met over a dozen students from Detroit Mercy and Michigan, and to a person was impressed with the amazing talent and individuals who joined us in D.C. Finding a way as a dentist to connect with them in school as a mentor or just as a contact could prove to

be a huge win long term.

The way I found my practice in 1996 was through my then-fiancee's dentist. He walked in and checked with Beth and asked where I was in school. I was in my senior year and was ready to get out and get going. His team really helped me out and I ended up purchasing his satellite practice. It worked back then, and it can work now. Those relationships can really help.

Journal: On a somewhat related note, many of our component societies are experiencing challenges in terms of finding individuals to serve in various capacities at the local level. What would you say to a member to encourage him or her to get involved and develop those relationships? Is there anything the MDA can do to encourage involvement?

Christy: I can speak from personal experience that being involved in our association has helped me to be a better dentist and a better leader in my practice as well. When I started with organized dentistry, it was at the local component level. That's always a great way to connect with other dentists in the community, who for the most part are happy to help as a mentor or be a resource. I had mentors who helped me with practice challenges, plus learned leadership skills from them. Sometimes, more importantly, I learned how not to lead. I would strongly recommend for members to step up and take ownership in their local component.

I can talk all day about why members should get involved. The biggest thing I learned at all levels of the association is that members will not show up at a Board meeting or join a committee if they are never asked or invited. Local component leaders need to connect and communicate with their members to have them say "yes" to getting involved. Leaders need to understand the roles they are



Quick review — Sue Downing, a member of the office's business team, reviews a patient's account with Christy.

asking people to say “yes” to, give the people an understanding of the commitment in time and energy, and lastly, they need to stand and mentor those new leaders on their path. The first step, as always, is a one-to-one connection.

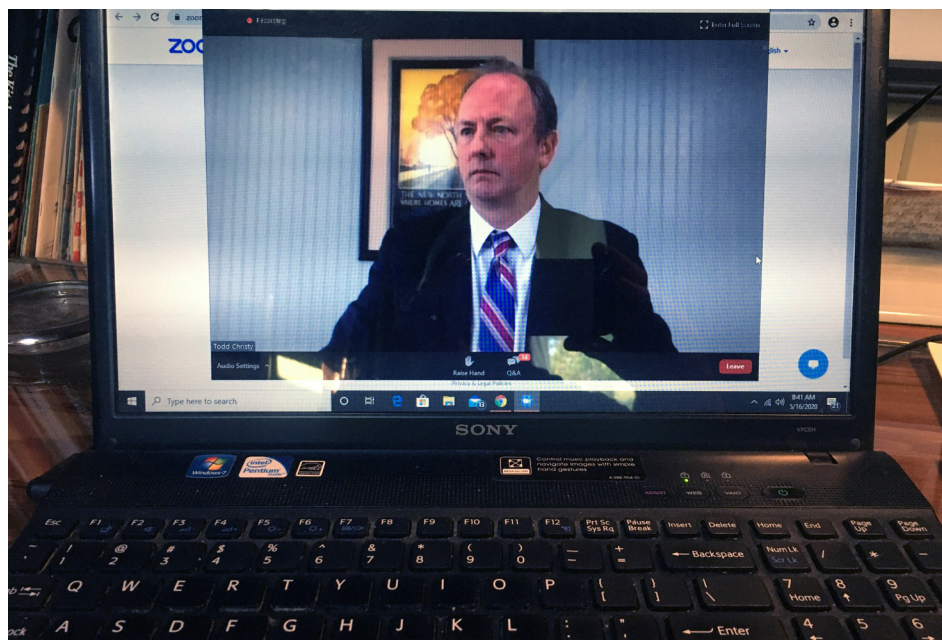
Journal: That’s very true. We’ve heard that over and over.

Christy: Involvement many times begins at the local level. But there are opportunities at the statewide level as well. Some may be as simple as hosting a speaker at the Annual Session — we always need people to do that. I believe more should take advantage of our LEAD program, our Mentor Program, and the Leadership Forum we have in September. You could attend an in-district legislative meeting, or take photos at a component meeting and send them into the *Journal*, or sign up for the MDA COVER program, which is a locum tenens service. There are many ways to get involved, and the MDA is looking for members to get involved.

Journal: Can you speak more about some of the MDA’s mentoring programs that are in place?

Christy: Yes. So for instance, the LEAD Program is a year-long program for those members who want to take a step forward on their path. It isn’t only for new graduates though. I cannot say how much I believe in this program, and the results from our previous classes show the effect it has had at the local, state, and national level. Quite a few of our leaders now have gone through this program. Most important to me though is the effect it has on the members at their personal level. It’s great.

Our MDA Mentor Program keeps moving forward, connecting members to members based on their needs or interests. This is fairly new and I’m hoping to see this program grow more



House speaker — Christy served for six years as speaker of the MDA House of Delegates, including in 2020, when he led a virtual House session at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

in the coming year by spotlighting it to help members connect.

Last, I cannot speak highly enough about the Leadership Forum in September in Lansing. There are areas of focus for component leaders. Then there are presentations on leadership in the dental practice, and panel discussions and open forums where participants can raise issues and challenges and find solutions. This event provides a unique opportunity for communicating best practices across all those areas of focus, connecting leaders across the state for future collaboration. It’s a great way to see you’re not alone in the challenge of leadership at all levels.

Journal: Now onto another issue that’s also related to membership — the American Dental Association has experienced a decline in membership for a number of years now, and may soon dip under the 50% mark nationally. Yet Michigan dentists continue to support the MDA, and our membership has been steady at around 75%. Why is that, and what is the answer for the

ADA — or is there one?

Christy: I think MDA dentists support the MDA and maintain their membership for as many reasons as we have dentists. I’m sure there are always one or two reasons why our members make the commitment to renew their membership and stay active to whatever level that works for them. I think members stay members of the MDA because of our strong continuing education offerings over diverse topics, our MDA *Journal*, our engaged MDA staff team as a resource in the areas of dental practice, our legislative advocacy to help our practices — and then, hands down, the MDA Insurance and MDA Services endorsed programs are the best available that help member dentists and their practices. There are more benefits than those, but personally those are the areas I look to the MDA.

Regarding the ADA, their problem is a national problem, where they deal with more than 50 other constituencies. They cannot wave a
(Continued on Page 38)

magic wand to fix the local, state, or territory problems and challenges faced everywhere else. I do know that a number of the initiatives that the MDA has started and succeeded with have been passed along through the ADA to other states to help them in their work. We are a leader in that respect. The ADA is currently working on its new membership initiative, and our Board of Trustees met with the incoming ADA president-elect as

well as the ADA team at our February board meeting. It's still a work in progress though. More information will be coming before the ADA House of Delegates meets in October.

Folks need to realize that the ADA member percentage relies on all the constituent and local components to provide support and reasons to join as well. The MDA is fortunate in that we've had a long history of high involvement, and our for-profit subsid-

aries are able to provide us with non-dues income that allows us to provide more services to our members than perhaps some other states. We are reaping the benefits of some of those leaders back in the '80s who started MDA Insurance and then MDA Services, so that we weren't entirely reliant on dues for revenue.

Journal: Getting back to involvement — how did you get involved in organized dentistry? What spurred you on to become a Board member, MDA secretary, then come back as House speaker, and now president?

Christy: I started my involvement in dental school with ASDA, but more so with student government. After graduation, I was invited to a Board meeting at Lakeland Valley District. I got involved there on the Board and chairing the membership committee, and then Peer Review/Ethics. When no one would step up from our society to take on the role of trustee to the MDA Board, I offered to help. The learning curve was steep at that time. Governance was markedly different and regionally based. There wasn't always openness between some trustees to partner together on the best way forward for the whole association. But when I left the Board after six years serving on it, the one role I wanted if it ever came available was speaker of the House. I had always enjoyed the parliamentary side of how meetings moved and created outcomes and success for our association. So, I did that and enjoyed it. Eventually I felt a call to serve as president and utilize my skillset and passion for what we do. I want to help this year in communicating with our members in my own way to engage them and connect members across the state so they succeed.

Journal: You mention member success. That's part of the MDA's mission. What do you think the state of Michigan's



Always a Spartan — Christy is that rarity among MDA Board members — a fan of the Green and White! After MSU, he graduated from Detroit Mercy Dental (Class of '96).

dental economy is right now? Are our members feeling relatively successful, or are dentists feeling the pinch of the past few years' inflation and other economic issues?

Christy: I think that the economy definitely continues to be a challenge on dental practices across the state, and nationwide for that matter. This year is, of course, an election year, which always throws a wrench into the works. The uncertainty in the presidential election creates worry. Inflation nationwide is still present, and that shows up in our members' practice bottom lines. Third-party payers, if practices work with them, don't appear to be keeping up with the inflationary changes. That cuts into the profitability of a practice. On the plus side, the recent increase in Medicaid funding and participation is one area that I've heard is helping members to better serve their patients as well as help their practices financially.

Journal: What do you think the MDA does particularly well?

Christy: The MDA has got a lot of things that are going well according to our most recent member opinion survey. I'd mentioned earlier the MDA *Journal*, CE programs, and legislative advocacy. We are moving forward with the utilization of Salesforce, which is a customer service membership system that the ADA is adopting, and I believe that will further improve our connection and serve of our members' needs.

Journal: And what do you think the MDA could do better?

Christy: The truth be told, we can all always do better at communication. As I said before, the new systems coming online for our MDA team to work with will improve how we serve our members. Personally, I would also like to see our committee structure be reinvigorated, with members stepping up to serve so their voices and unique skillsets are best used to help our MDA grow and be stronger. Our members are the key. Also, I would love to see our local components engage and invite Board members to attend either virtually or in person to their Board meetings there. Ask questions and get to know those who represent you. For six years as speaker, I talked about that as one of the best ways to know what's going on and to share your voice. There were not many components that did that, and I want to see more occurring in terms of connecting components and the MDA Board members.

Journal: Tell us about your family and some of the things you enjoy outside of dentistry.

Christy: Beth and I met at MSU, where she graduated with a social science degree, then got her teaching certifica-



New president — After serving as an MDA trustee and House speaker, Christy is ready to get to work as MDA president.

tion through Grand Valley State University and her master's in educational leadership at Western. Beth taught for a few years for the Benton Harbor Schools before transitioning to working with our kids' schools and with non-profits in coordinating volunteers. Most important to her, though, is giving her time and talent as a hands-on volunteer to impact our community.

Will, our oldest son, graduated in April this year with a degree in public policy from MSU. He'll be starting his master's in the fall in public administration. Drew, our younger son, is starting his senior year at MSU in mechanical engineering, with a focus on biomedical engineering.

As a family, we enjoy spending time outside, with hiking, kayaking, golf, and boating in the warm seasons. In the winter, you'll find us out in the snow, skiing and snowshoeing. We love exploring Michigan, and with that finding new breweries and experiences that our great state has to offer. Beth and I are looking forward to seeing new hometowns across the state over the coming year as I travel to components as the president of the Michigan Dental Association.

Journal: I'm sure it's going to be a good year.

Christy: Thank you. I look forward to it, and I hope everyone reading this will feel free to contact me with any issues or concerns they may have. ●

Contact Dr. Christy via email at xtrctr@sbcglobal.net.