

Directing Dentist

■ Dr. Lee Shackelford '77 reflects on 24-year career

When Lee Shackelford '77 graduated from the NU College of Dentistry in 1982, he envisioned a conventional career serving people much like himself in northwest Missouri.

Twenty-four years later he reflected on the path his professional development has taken, especially the past 14 years serving in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

"All I ever wanted was to be a wet-fingered dentist, and the Corps has given me opportunities to do so much more," he said.

Capt. Shackelford recently served as director of training and career development for the Commissioned Corps, where his passion and focus were on developing the next generation of leaders.

"The opportunity to make an impact on thousands of officers who will serve hundreds of thousands of citizens, thereby affecting the health of the nation, is something the average dentist does not get to do," he said.

The leadership training developed by Capt. Shackelford is critical to the Commissioned Corps' mission of protecting, promoting and advancing the health and safety of the nation.

"Forty-four percent of officers are eligible to retire in the next five years - 22 percent could leave right now," he said. "As we transform the Commissioned Corps, we have to build leaders from the bottom up."

Capt. Shackelford's talents and efforts have been recognized in the form of a promotion to the position of executive assistant to Assistant Secretary of Health (ASH) Admiral John O. Agwunobi.

In this capacity, he

will assist the ASH in coordinating responsibilities for overseeing the Commissioned Corps. "I'm humbled to have been considered for such a position, and am thrilled to be able to contribute to the health of our nation as a senior advisor to the assistant secretary."

Along the way, Capt. Shackelford has had his share of adventures and a variety of heart-warming experiences.

During his tenure in the Commissioned Corps, he has served in the Federal Bureau of Prisons and in Native American communities, two assignments that centered on providing care to underserved communities, a hallmark of the Commissioned Corps.

Capt. Shackelford said he is particularly fond of his memories of the Navajo elders he served in the Northern Navajo Medical Center in Shiprock, New Mexico.

"Following local custom, we referred to the elders by the Navajo words for grandpa and grandmom, which are only terms of endearment, but also of reverence. They would come in wearing their native dress, speaking little English, and we would tend to their oral health."

Capt. Shackelford said that often dentists were the first to spot signs of diabetes through the condition of their mouths. "Through our 'oral detection' we were able to get the elders the immediate medical treatment they needed," he said.

Capt. Shackelford also has been

deployed by the Commissioned Corps to respond to public health emergencies, including serving as the deputy commander of a federal medical station in Meridian, Mississippi, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina. His assignment there included working with a team to set up a 500-bed field hospital in a naval air hanger within a very short timeframe of a day and a half.

In another deployment, he served as a clinical dentist helping marines based at California's 29 Palms prepare to deploy to Iraq.

"In order for marines to be deployed, they must have a 94 percent force readiness level. The base didn't have

enough dentists on staff to conduct the oral health exams on the soldiers and do the necessary dental work to meet readiness levels. So, they called me and other corps dentists in to help, and together we worked in two-week rotations over several months to prepare the marines for on-time deployment," he said.

Having grown up in a family that prized public service - his father was a coast guard officer - Capt. Shackelford views his career in the Commissioned Corps as an opportunity to give back.

Capt. Shackelford, who was a member of the baseball team while a student at what was then Kearney State, said, "I missed Vietnam by 20 days. President Nixon suspended the draft three weeks before I turned 20. While I wasn't looking forward to going over there, I felt that I had failed to do my part to serve my country. The Commissioned Corps fills that void in me," he said. "When I was in school, I didn't know the Commissioned Corps existed. Now I'm committed to ensuring that students today know about his unique opportunity. It is my personal mission to work every day to carry on the proud tradition that I've been lucky to be part of and empowered to make even better." ■

