



My family and me in New York City for Thanksgiving 2018.

Up Close

with WALTER O. WHITLEY, OD, MBA, FAAO

When did you decide to pursue a career in optometry? Who influenced you to choose this path?

I didn't choose optometry until my junior year of college when I couldn't see the chalkboard from the back of the room. My dad scheduled me with his friend and optometrist, James Conkey, OD. Jim got me interested in optometry, and to this day I thank him for that. Jim also encouraged me to do a residency, which I did with Douglas K. Devries, OD. Doug has been a great mentor, and has helped me to develop professionally and to evolve into the clinician, lecturer, and leader I am today.

What have you learned from your collaborations with the committees and boards you are on, including the American Academy of Optometry (AAO) Anterior Segment Section and the American Optometric Association (AOA)?

I love optometry! Over the years, the one thing I've tried to teach students and residents is that you get what you put into it. I've tried to lead by example by contributing to move our profession forward for the benefit of our patients. Whether it's being involved in academia with our residency program, serving on an AAO committee, or being involved with the AOA and state associations, we can all make a difference, and I encourage everyone to get involved. Nonetheless, I couldn't serve on all of these committees and boards without the support of my lovely wife Lindsay and my three boys, Beckham, Brock, and Brady. It's important that I always put them first.

You have been involved in more than two dozen clinical trials. What about them interests you most?

I love learning about innovation in pharmaceutical and medical device development. Clinical research helps keep me on the cutting edge of science and technology and brings a unique perspective to patient care. We have many patients who love to participate in clinical trials, and we are able to offer our patients the option to contribute to science and the future of patient care. The development process helps me appreciate the details involved in bringing drugs and devices to the market.

Recently you became Medical Editor at DryEyeCoach. What does this new position entail?

Dry eye is one of the hottest topics in eye care. There is so much to learn and more that we have yet to learn. I love to teach, and this position offered an opportunity to collaborate with our colleagues and industry members to address a huge unmet need for our patients and practices. Be on the lookout for future programs, podcasts, and opportunities to help take your dry eye practice to the next level.

What has been the most memorable experience of your career thus far?

Last year I became president of the Virginia Optometric Association. We had an awesome celebration banquet for our outgoing president Jen Weigel, OD, among our Virginia Optometry family. During the meeting, my good friends Jeffrey C. Michaels, OD; Jerry Neidigh, OD; Adam Parker, OD; Joseph E. Droter, OD; and Bo Keeney worked with my wife and the rest of the board to make it special. My wife and kids couldn't attend, so they made a special congratulations video for

me and surprised me with an appearance by my brother Warren Whitley, OD, who flew in for the meeting. And who doesn't love getting roasted by your friends too?

What recent technological advances do you find exciting?

Now that I'm 45, I'm excited about the presbyopic technologies, from eye drops to refractive surgical procedures to IOL options. There are a half-dozen companies working on drops to help improve near vision, and the early data look promising. I'm ready to use them when they are available. As for cataract surgery, the latest innovations have truly been life-changers for many of our patients. In the past year, the newest IOLs have included trifocal technology and extended vision IOLs, which have been over-delivering in their results. Patient satisfaction is at an all-time high. I thought the multifocals previously on the market were impressive, but these additions have taken things to the next level.

What's your favorite family tradition?

We love to travel. Our tradition is to vacation every year the week of Thanksgiving. Each family member gets to choose a destination idea, and we pick one out of a hat. So far New York City has been the favorite, but we can't wait to go to the Grand Canyon. ■

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- Financial disclosure: None