

My Work as an Eyemaker: The First 55 Years

ABSTRACT: Ocularistry has evolved from a family-run cottage industry to the profession that it has become today. Many small, obscure stepping stones have somehow formed the contemporary methods of this unique and interesting field. This article is a reflection of one ocularist's journey of more than half a century.

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In January 1948, I answered an ad in the *Richmond Times Dispatch*: “Wanted, Optical Technician”. While I made a telephone call to the listed number, I knew nothing of the optical world. I didn’t even wear glasses. My father was a printer and at 19 years, I had no interest in his line of work.

I was familiar with the optical company’s name noted at the bottom of the ad. Galeski Optical was a well-known optical company with several stores sprinkled in Virginia. The owner, Joe Galeski, Sr., hired me as an apprentice although “Lab Manager” was my job title. I believe Joe Galeski was a true pioneer in the prosthetic eye business. I will always be grateful that he hired me and that I had an opportunity to work with him. He gave me my “break”.¹⁻³

After some time, I realized how fortunate I was in landing this job. I was not German, nor did I have a family member already established in this unique craft. I didn’t wear a prosthesis (or know anyone who did), and I did not get my opportunity through dentistry or the military, which seemed to be the more common avenue in the 1950s. I can still see the look on my mother’s face when I first described my new job. This is the same look I get, 50 years later, when I tell a new acquaintance about my profession. I call this look or moment a “conversation stopper”.

During, my first years on the job, the term, ocularist, was not a common coined word. I am not certain when or how this word evolved. Eyemaker or eyefitter, while not sophisticated, always seemed more appropriate in describing my duties. Regardless of the word, I always needed to explain my job title to the majority of those unfamiliar with the work of an ocularist.

When I first started working, glass was still the dominant material being used for making prosthetic eyes, although it was quickly changing over to plastics. I learned the ins and outs of my new profession: starting with the manufacturing of plastic stock eyes to semi-custom to eventual



FIGURE 1 The evolution of prosthetics in the last sixty years has grown from a small cottage guild to the specialty profession that it has become today. This collage shows a few of the steps ocularist has taken over the last fifty-five years.

impression-fitted eyes. My career started with a family business, which was eventually sold. I later worked for another (prosthetic eye) company before I established my own private practice. I have worked almost my entire career in Richmond, Virginia, (Figure 1).

The American Society of Ocularists was formed in 1957 and I became a member in 1960. I became board certified in 1981 and have maintained my membership for 45 years. While my attendance at meetings has ceased, I have always valued the society.

Over the years, I have worked on thousands of patients and have seen an assortment of interesting cases that every ocularist sees. I learned to separate myself from work for, at times as we all know, the patient's loss can be disturbing. I have had the privilege of meeting and working with many great patients—beautiful people—whom I only wish that I could have met under different circumstances. Some of my religious patients have told me that we will all meet again one day in a different life as whole people. Maybe so.

During my career I have met and established great relationships with many ophthalmologists, optometrists, opticians, nurses, and other related health care professionals. I witnessed some of the finest eye care available and now find myself a patient of these same caring people.

My profession never seemed like work, for I never tired of helping the worried young mother, distraught teenager, or nervous senior. Ocularists are the lucky one. We have found a rewarding profession that, for the most part, we all love. Not many professions can say that. This feeling may be the same that physicians, actors or football coaches have for the work is more of an identity of who one is. The word, workaholic, never crossed my mind.

I have passed on my favorite (Windsor Newton) brush to the younger generation. I have found that it is not easy to retire as an ocularist. I still wonder why someone would wear a black patch out in public, and I cringe when I hear a tasteless or insensitive joke about glass eyes. If they only knew the beauty of our unique profession or the pain and isolation our patients sometimes feel. When I reflect on all of these things that have evolved over time it is no wonder that eyemaking will always be with me.

REFERENCES

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