



# Lessons Learned

## 1947 Graduate Used Humor in Teaching

Jack Runniger, OD '47, recently retired from optometry activities after almost 70 years of service. Although he had been retired from practice about 25 years, Dr. Runniger had continued writing the popular "Lessons Learned" monthly advice column in *Optometric Management magazine* until June of this year.

In 1996, Dr. Runniger (shown with then SCO President Billy Cochran, OD '68) was among the first alumni to receive SCO's Lifetime Achievement Award, the highest honor bestowed on alumni. In addition, he served as president of the Georgia Optometric Association and SECO, received an honorary degree from SCO, and was selected for the National Optometric Hall of Fame.

He had been in practice more than 20 years before he began his optometric "literary" career, including the column which appeared monthly for 43 years in national optometric publications. His intent was to tell of the many humorous goofs he made in practice, not only to entertain readers, but also to teach younger ODs what NOT to do.



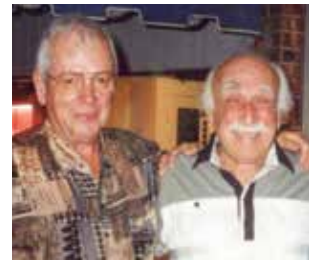
SCO recently interviewed Dr. Runniger about his retirement and his memories:

### How did you decide on a career in optometry?

Not only the **HOW** of I became an optometrist but also the **WHEN** and **WHERE** are kind of strange. The **WHEN** was Feb. 18, 1945, the **WHERE** was aboard a ship in the fleet invading Iwo Jima the next morning. And the **REASON** I was discussing it then was that I was "skeered."

Since I couldn't sleep, I found another wide awake guy and we talked to keep our mind off the upcoming battle. His name was Arthur Chalmers, and I discovered that in civilian life he was an optometrist. I knew practically nothing about optometry, but it sounded interesting, so when the war ended, I wrote his school, SCO, for more information.

They had only one slot left for the class entering in April of the next year. I had to make a decision right then before my life was postponed even further. So I signed up, choosing it as the profession I'd seek by the process of elimination. It was a lucky and happy choice!



With Irv Borish, OD

### Where did you go to practice after graduation?

I accepted an offer to go into practice with Dr. Dave Williams in Rome, Georgia, gradually becoming a junior partner. A native of Aurora, Illinois, I had found I had no desire to return to the northern states. We arrived in our new hometown in the sunny south in January of 1948, in the midst of a week-long sub-freezing spell.

To add to the misery, housing was scarce, and we had been able to find only a furnished room to rent. It was heated by an inadequate floor furnace, which we were not allowed to have lit if we weren't present, nor at night. Never had I ever been that cold in Yankeeland! Then on my first day of practice, I found that Dr. Williams had left for Florida two days before. And I didn't know my butt from third base about the practice. After that miserable beginning, things had to improve — there wasn't any way to go but up.

### What are some of the changes you witnessed during your career?

I was in the first wave of World War II servicemen to complete their schooling and go into practice. The older ODs who had been running the associations were ready to turn things over to the new ones. So I ended up president of GOA in 1952 at age 29.

We did have a couple of accomplishments of which I am proud. First, optometry was still defined by state law as a “semi-skilled trade.” We were able to get this changed to a “learned profession,” which was necessary before further legislative improvements were possible.



With President Jimmy Carter

Second, University of Houston College of Optometry’s first dean, Dr. Charles Stewart, in his book, *The Founding Years*, gives credit to our executive director Felton Gordon and me for first getting in touch with the Southern Regional Educational Board, a move that ultimately resulted in financial grants for state contract students to regional schools. I was president of SECO in 1961 after being part of the committee that formed SECO in the late '50s.

#### How did your writing career begin?

From having a big mouth. While serving on an AOA committee, I told them that I felt that their public information pamphlet on presbyopia was too negative. So they said, “Then rewrite it,” which was not what I had in mind. But it led to authoring articles in both professional and lay journals, then to editorship of three different optometric journals over 21 years, and then columnist and consultant to *Optometric Management* for 20 years before hanging it up this year.



Baxley, Georgia native Kara Clark, '19, received Dr. Runniger's scholarship and support as he encouraged her to pursue optometry at his alma mater 70 years after his own time as a student.

#### Your columns often contained illustrative and funny experiences. Do you have any favorites?

“Do your eyes matter?” I once asked a patient who was having redness and irritation in her eyes. She looked up at me and in a hurt voice said, “Well, they matter to me!”

Another favorite was during a case history when I discovered the patient’s grandmother had glaucoma.

“Is she taking anything for it?” I asked.

“Yes, marijuana,” he replied.

“Is it helping?”

“Yes and no. She doesn’t see any better, but now she doesn’t give a damn.”

#### How about children?

With their lack of experiential background, there were priceless encounters with them. Like the lad I asked how old he was.

“5,” he said.

“When will you be 6?” I asked.

“On my next birthday,” said he with a “What a stupid question” look in his eye.

#### Did you derive more humor from your patients, or did they find more humor in your approach to them?

I quickly learned where humor is concerned you need to be able to take it. On the golf course one day during the infancy of contact lenses, a close friend said:

“Runniger, I’m not going to be able to wear these contact lenses playing golf when there is the least bit of wind. They make my eyes water.”

“Nonsense,” said I. “Gil Morgan [OD '73] wears them and he’s a champion PGA golfer.”

“Yeah. But you didn’t fit his,” he quipped.



With Gil Morgan, OD '73 on the golf course.

Or another friend, who in the midst of a bunch of people, said to me, “You sure did help my dry eye condition.” I was of course pleased until he went on to say, “You charged me so much, it brought tears to my eyes.”



Visit [Optometricmanagement.com](http://Optometricmanagement.com) to read more of Dr. Runniger's humorous anecdotes in columns published from the past decade.