



Saluting Dr. Frank Sobkowski, Founding Dean of SIU SDM

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EDWARDSVILLE - Dr. Francis "Frank" J. Sobkowski, the founding dean of the Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine, passed away on Friday,

February 10, 2017 at the age of 83. His invaluable service, vision for success and legacy will live on in the minds of the students, who attend the School he worked so diligently to create, for generations to come.

In the late 1960s, the need for experienced dental professionals in southern Illinois was reaching crisis proportions. Establishment of a new dental school at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville was proposed in February 1968 by a subcommittee for the Illinois State Board of Higher Education. The plan was rigorously endorsed in May 1968 by the Madison and St. Clair County dental societies. The State Board of Higher Education appropriated \$1.1 million to establish a new School of Dentistry at Southern Illinois University. The school was to be temporarily housed in the science building Alton Center of SIU until a new facility could be built on the Edwardsville campus, former Chancellor John S. Rendleman said.

Enter Sobkowski. In 1969, he accepted the position as special assistant to the president of health education at SIU. Shortly thereafter, at the age of 35, he was named dean of the new SIU School of Dental Medicine. In the Nov. 14, 1970 edition of the *Alton Evening Telegraph*, Sobkowski hoped the school acted “as a catalyst to draw qualified people to the area.”

“We want this school to act as a focal point to renew interest in the medical and dental professions in Southern Illinois,” Sobkowski was quoted. “This will be a place that can teach young dentists and serve the needs of the dental community that is in the area as well as those who, we hope, will come into the area.”

Sobkowski was uniquely qualified for the position. Born in August 28, 1933, in Dunkirk, N.Y., he earned a bachelor’s from Hamilton College in 1950 and headed to the University of Pennsylvania in 1954 where he attained a DDS and master’s in physiology. He earned a doctorate in radiation biology from the University of Rochester in 1959 and joined its faculty shortly thereafter. In 1966, Sobkowski joined the faculty at the UCLA, and became chair of the division of oral radiology and assistant dean of the School of Dentistry.

With Sobkowski at the helm of the newly formed SIU SDM, applications began pouring in. On Friday, May 12, 1972, the School was officially accredited by the American Dental Association and began accepting its first class of students. With this milestone, the institution became the first dental school outside of Cook County fully capable of training the next generation of dental professionals.

“This is a very important step,” said Sobkowski shortly after the news of accreditation broke in the *Alton Evening Telegraph*. “I feel like we accomplished a large part of our dream.”

The inaugural class of 24 students arrived in September 1972. The students, primarily from central and southern Illinois, were chosen from a pool of over 600 applications.

Besides offering a premier location for students to receive a quality dental health education under the direction of Dr. Richard Coy, Sobkowski hoped to see the School begin offering patient care for community residents.

“Though there is no question that our prime mission is education, the dental school will be more than a school—we are planning it as an oral health center,” he said in the September 13, 1972, edition of the *Alton Evening Telegraph*.

Sobkowski stepped down from his position of dean at the School in 1974 and became an orthodontics resident and clinical professor at Saint Louis University’s (SLU) School of Orthodontics. He opened a private practice shortly thereafter and practiced orthodontics for 20 years.

In 1999, Sobkowski retired from SLU and returned to the institution he worked so diligently to build, serving as a professor of dental radiology. Even after his official retirement from the University, he served as a valuable mentor to Dr. Bruce Rotter, current SIU SDM dean.

“On a personal level, I have known Frank since I was a student at the School of Dental Medicine,” said Rotter, who received his doctorate from SIU SDM in 1982. “He has been my teacher, my colleague and over the years, our roles changed and I became his administrator.”

This week, the SDM dedicated the recently renovated clinic on the Edwardsville campus. Initially built in 1997 to add additional program capacity to the School, the clinic is now equipped to expand the scope of care and provide a high level of training to students.

“Dr. Sobkowski’s mentorship and ability to recall where we once were historically with the school and help us move forward was a valuable asset,” Rotter said. “He was not only a legacy to the institution, but a friend and mentor to many of us here at the School of Dental Medicine.

“He had a heart for the School and dental health in general,” Rotter said. “Had he been here today, I think this would have made him extremely proud.”

[The SIU School of Dental Medicine](#) students manage approximately 35,000 patient visits each year at its patient clinics in Alton and East St. Louis. In addition, students offer oral health treatment, screenings and education to more than 10,000 people

annually through a wide variety of off-campus community outreach events. These opportunities provide students the training they need to graduate and become highly skilled dentists. The School of Dental Medicine is a vital oral health care provider for residents of southern and central Illinois, and the St. Louis metropolitan region.