

William R. Proffit, 1936-2018

William R. Proffit, a beloved and respected orthodontic educator, author, speaker, and friend, died September 30, 2018, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Known to many simply as “Prof,” Dr Proffit’s style was succinct. He avoided verbosity and puffery. He simplified complex concepts, giving them structure in his writing and delivering them in lectures in plain measured language. He was proud of his writing skills, and as I compose this tribute, I can feel him looking over my shoulder, editing and making suggestions to be concise and without pretention.

Dr Proffit’s textbook, *Contemporary Orthodontics*, the standard used in dental schools throughout the world, is the world’s most influential orthodontic resource. He contributed to and guided every chapter in every edition, and that is its strength and reason for its endurance. He coauthored *Contemporary Treatment of Dentofacial Deformity* and 2 other books on surgical-orthodontic treatment. He published more than 170 scientific articles in peer-reviewed journals and more than 50 book chapters and invited contributions. He was the Kenan Distinguished Professor of Orthodontics at the University of North Carolina and was Chair of that department from 1975 to 2001. He was recognized for excellence in clinical research with the Norton Ross award of the American Dental Association, for teaching excellence with the Jarabak Award of the American Association of Orthodontists, and for contributions to orthodontics with the Albert H. Ketcham Award of the American Board of Orthodontics. He was appropriately recognized in 2017 as the first recipient of the AAO’s lifetime achievement award.

Dr Proffit grew up in Buies Creek, North Carolina, the son of teachers. His intellect was evidenced by the fact that he taught himself to read at age 3 and simply skipped first grade. His mother was chair of the chemistry department at Campbell College and, recognizing his academic potential, thought his calling would be in the field of medicine. When he was a child, Prof received orthodontic treatment from Edgar Baker, and he recognized then that orthodontics was a profession so beneficial to the lives of patients.



William R. Proffit

Dr Proffit received his dental degree from the University of North Carolina, beginning a life-long affiliation with the school. He earned a PhD degree in physiology from the Medical College of Virginia, and completed the orthodontic residency program at the University of Washington. He joined the faculty at the University of Kentucky in 1965 and served as the first chairman of the orthodontics department, and then taught at the University of Florida for 2 years. In 1975, he returned to UNC and joined the orthodontics faculty. He served as a professor and later became chair of the department of orthodontics, a post he held for 26 years. He continued to serve as an adjunct faculty member, and remained active as a teacher and lecturer until his death.

I think it is fair to say he was our most influential orthodontist throughout the past 45 years. To put that number into perspective, recognize that orthodontics has existed as a specialty for 120 years, so Dr. Proffit was influential for more than one-third of the existence of the profession! As the specialty of orthodontics developed, department chairmen or clinicians who were strong personalities, charismatic and influential, shaped orthodontic thinking. He educated “hands-on” more than 260 orthodontic residents, but his intellectual reach

extended far beyond orthodontics and dentistry. Dr. Proffit elevated the specialty to the scientific standard, demanding evidence that what one said was true. In my first year of residency at UNC, before we began our first seminar, Prof set the rules: "When you make a statement, it is either a fact or an opinion. If it is a fact, be able to cite your reference, and if it is an opinion, just say so. Don't try to bluff your way through it!" Prof frequently offered "opportunities," which meant that you would be working with him on some project on which you would come to understand the meaning of the word "work" but would also learn more than you imagined yourself capable of.

It might seem that, given his resumé, Dr Proffit had no outside interests. But his passions for trains, acquired at childhood, and for cultivating roses and azaleas were always evident. He and his wife, Sara, were married for 65 years, and each home they shared over the years boasted an abundance of azaleas transplanted from his Aunt Lola's garden. Of all the times I phoned him in my lifetime, the only time that Sara would not interrupt him was when he was in his garden. He would consistently return the phone call—he always had time for you—but not until his work in the garden was done.

He is survived by his wife Sara; daughter Lola Baker and her husband Mike; sons Ed Proffit and his wife Melissa, and Glenn Proffit and his wife Laura; and by 8 grandchildren and 9 great-grandchildren.

I have read many testimonials to Dr Proffit and have had conversations with many who were close to him as a colleague and friend. But then who in orthodontics does not consider him a friend? His life story was one of warmth, leadership, encouragement, mentorship, and humility. His former students would tell you that he did not teach you an orthodontic technique but taught you how to think. He was charismatic, and you never wanted to disappoint him.

Given the personal relationships so many had with him and his many contributions, how do you summarize Bill Proffit? I was asked a few years ago to try to describe Prof in a paragraph. I likened him to a great ship. As I observed him over the years, he always sailed straight ahead, always knowing where he was going. People admired him as he went by, and as he passed he left a wake as a great ship would. The wake that Bill Proffit left was ever-widening, as his personality, knowledge, and leadership has spanned individuals, nations, and generations. Many thought Prof to be unapproachable, a result of his professional stature and his quiet humility. I never ceased learning from him. He was the best teacher I ever had, but more than that he was a dear, good, good friend that I will always appreciate, love, and remember. He will be forever missed, and as he loved to say at the end of a project, "you done good."

*David Sarver
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