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At 84, “Denny” Denison Still Serving Amputees

In January 1943, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army Medical Corps, his name was Alfred Denison.

In short order, he gained a nickname—“Denny”—and a career in prosthetics. Both took a strong hold and endure to this day, more than 65 years later.

Denison is believed to be the oldest—and longest continuously serving full-time prosthetist in the United States.

Five days a week, for eight hours a day, the 84-year-old plies his craft at the Scheck & Siress office in Hickory Hills.

“I’m going to continue as long as my health continues,” said Denison. That bodes well for those in his care: in his first 21 years at Scheck & Siress, Denison missed a mere half-day of work due to illness.

On most Fridays, Denison travels to Shriners Hospital for Children in Chicago. During a typical visit, he cares for about 20 youths.

He estimates that he has helped more than 4,000 amputees during his career, including the late Bill Veeck. The famed medical Mayo brothers, Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie, referred Veeck to Denison.

For more than 25 years, Denison served the legendarily flamboyant Major League baseball owner. Veeck was fond of flicking his cigarettes in an ashtray that Denison designed into his famed “peg leg.”

In 1987, at 63, Denison joined Scheck & Siress after an already-storied career in which he had owned his own prosthetic business for 25 years.

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Prosthetic residents “gravitate” to Denison, who treats everyone with respect and professionalism, said John Ruzich, the laboratory manager at the Scheck & Siress office in Hickory Hills, where Denison has worked for the past decade.

“I learn more from him in how he treats people. When I first met Denny, I was in awe,” recalled Ruzich. “He was ‘the guy’ in Chicago in the 1970s when I was getting started. Even now, he’s always coming up with new and fresh ideas. He’s amazing.”

Denison has earned the respect, admiration and gratitude of numerous others. Among them is Mary Novotny, founder of the Amputee Coalition of America.

In 1962, she was 12 when Denison first began building prostheses for her. He patiently and persistently developed numerous prosthetic legs for her over the years, and has been a source of “constant encouragement to try anything I wanted,” Novotny said.

“That is not just a job for Denny,” said Novotny. “It’s a life commitment and he loves the people he works with.”

Denison grew up Alfred Perkovsky on a farm in Estonia. In 1938, when he was 14, he and his mother took the famous cruise ship Bremen to Ellis Island. The uncle and aunt who sponsored them provided them with a home, and a new last name that sounded more “American.”

Because English was a new language, Denison began as a 1st-grade student. Before he had an opportunity to finish high school, the military beckoned him.

Since he began, the tools of his trade have changed dramatically. For example, whereas prostheses used to be wooden, they now are aluminum and plastic modular systems that offer patients much greater flexibility.

So while correcting a problem with a prosthesis years ago would have caused Denison to start an entirely new version, nowadays he is able to address those revisions with some creative tweaking.

A constant, however, has been Denison's passion to serve clients—not to settle for anything less than comfortable and functional prostheses.

“It's a perfection that you try to pursue,” he said. “You hope to come as close as you can.”

More About “Denny” Denison

His career, spent entirely in and around Chicago, has included serving part-time as a Northwestern University staff prosthetist; serving as president of the American Orthotic and Prosthetic Association (AOPA) Region VI; being a founding member and president of the Midwest Chapter of the American Academy of Orthotists and Prosthetists; and serving as chairman of the American Board of Certification practical exams.

His recognition has included a Northwestern University Certificate of Appreciation (1963-1964), an American Academy of Orthotists and Prosthetists National Clinical Commitment Award (1998), and a Charter Member Recognition Award from the Midwest Chapter of the American Academy of Orthotists and Prosthetists (2002).

Denison met his wife, Helen, at a Polish picnic on Archer Avenue in Chicago. They were married from Oct. 23, 1948 until Helen's death on Sept. 12, 2001. Their daughters are Claudia and Karen, and they have four grandchildren.

Denison has resided in Tinley Park since 2004.

Online, more information about Denison, his colleagues and the work they perform is at www.scheckandsiress.com.