

Ophthalmology Times

CUTTING-EDGE ADVANCEMENTS

Lee Nordan, MD, innovator in refractive surgery, remembered



Lee T. Nordan, MD, known to the ophthalmic community as one of the leading and most innovative refractive surgeons, passed away Dec. 21, 2015 at the age of 69 from glioblastoma, a rare and extremely aggressive form of brain cancer.

To his colleagues, Dr. Nordan was a legend—someone who was not afraid to dream of the impossible, speak his truth, and invest his time and effort into bringing out the best in his fellow surgeons.

To his friends, he was an inspiration, a talent, and a force to be reckoned with on the golf course. He was also a devoted father and husband for whom his family meant the world.

In the span of his career, Dr. Nordan was a pioneer in refractive surgery, held five U.S. patents, one of them being a multifocal IOL, and authored *The Surgical Rehabilitation of Vision*, a

commonly referred to textbook on refractive surgery. At the end of his career, he was a practice consultant at North County Laser Eye Associates in Carlsbad, CA, where he trained Paul Chen, MD, before he retired.

“It was a privilege taking over Dr. Nordan's practice and working with him before his retirement,” Dr. Chen said. “Seeing his former patients over the years constantly reminds me of his lasting influence on ophthalmology and the refractive surgery field. I could always rely on Lee to offer insight for difficult or complicated cases.”



One of the most humbling milestones in the career of Robert H. Osher, MD, was receiving the 2004 Lee Nordan Achievement Award from Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today. “I was proud to receive this honor named after my dear friend,” he said. “I join so many others in expressing deep admiration for Dr. Lee Nordan and in celebrating the extraordinary way he lived his remarkable life.”

When Dr. Nordan had a speaking engagement, it was common for the room to be packed because everyone knew that he spoke from extensive experience and complete integrity. “Those who listened carefully would be treated to some surgical insight that was light years ahead of its time,” said Dr. Osher, MD, medical director emeritus of Cincinnati Eye Institute, Cincinnati.

Ron Bache, special advisor for Allergan, Irvine, CA, and former chief executive officer of AqueSys, spent countless hours with Dr. Nordan in the operating room and at the golf course, which Nordan thoroughly enjoyed. They would talk not only about ophthalmology, but also life, family, and the pursuit of happiness.

“Lee was invincible to me, and I just assumed he would overcome his illness just like he had done the impossible for so long,” Bache said. “Lee was family to me. He was a mentor to me. My life and the lives of so many others around the world are better, richer, and more real because of him.”

“I don't know why Lee was so gracious and patient with me, but he was so generous with his mind, time, and heart,” Bache said. “Lee taught me the concept and true meaning of intellectual honesty. He valued people who spoke about what they truly believed in, and he challenged those that did not. I owe Lee Nordan so much more than I could ever repay.”

“Lee Nordan was an innovator, a pioneer, a renegade and a really fun person to be around,” said Kerry D. Solomon, MD, managing partner, Carolina Eyecare Physicians, Charleston, SC. “Lee was pretty black and white with many issues and was not afraid to tell you how he felt. In today's world, that's rare! He was far ahead of his time...while ophthalmology lost a great innovator, I lost a mentor and dear friend.”

Stephen Lane, MD, medical director, Associated Eye Care, Stillwater, MN, could not agree more.

“[Dr. Nordan was] an ophthalmic renaissance man who never accepted the status quo, always seeking a better way, often with ideas that seemed bizarre for the time,” Dr. Lane said.

Dr. Nordan received his medical degree from the University of New Mexico in 1974 and completed his cornea fellowship at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Jules Stein Eye Institute (JSEI) in 1978. His mentors were the late Jose I. Barraquer, MD, and Thomas H. Pettit, MD. Decades after leaving JSEI, faculty members still remember Dr. Nordan as a hard-working and knowledgeable clinician who was committed to teaching.

“I remember distinctly that Lee was always available to us,” recalled Gary N. Holland, MD, faculty member in the cornea-external ocular disease division and the Jack H. Skirball Chair in Ocular Inflammatory Diseases, JSEI, who was a third-year medical student doing an ophthalmology elective during Dr. Nordan’s fellowship there. “[He was] willing to explain concepts about eye disease, even if they were not in his area of subspecialty, and he would frequently seek us out to demonstrate interesting findings.”

Arun C. Gulani, MD, Gulani Vision Institute, Jacksonville, FL, met Dr. Nordan in the early 2000s and would meet with him regularly when they would both attend meetings in California. “I still reach out to my cell phone where I expect to hear, ‘Arun, what’s new?’” Dr. Gulani said. “Despite an age difference of 30 years between us, we became friends. What a privilege to say the least, what a loss for ophthalmology!”

Many of Dr. Nordan’s conversations with colleagues would focus around how to make surgeons better understand refractive surgery and loosen their dependence on technology. Although many of the ideas Dr. Nordan had were years ahead of their time, he would encourage his fellow surgeons to stay hopeful and not give up on what could be possible.

Dr. Gulani remembers what an honor it was for Dr. Nordan to visit his operating room to see the birth of Corneoplastique, a unique type of vision corrective surgery, more than a decade ago. Dr. Gulani is working on a book about the procedure, which he plans to dedicate to Dr. Nordan.

While Dr. Nordan is known as being the first to accomplish many milestones in ophthalmology, his emphasis was never to be the first. Rather, what drove him was being the best.

“We have lost a colleague who was bigger than life and I have lost a great friend,” said Dr. Lane. “The many memories I have of Lee will keep him alive in my heart, but he will be dearly missed.”

Many of Dr. Nordan’s colleagues say they when they first met him, they instantly gravitated to how warm and friendly the world-renown surgeon was.

“He possessed a wonderful and disarming sense of humor coupled with a relentless, passionate need to search for the truth. The result was a joy to behold: a warm, incredibly creative man that so many of us simply loved to be with,” said Richard Mackool, MD, Mackool Eye Institute and Laser Center in Astoria, NY. “I thank my lucky stars for having known him so well, and I curse them for having taken him from us—far, far too soon.”

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Dr. Nordan will be “fondly remembered by many and his contributions to ophthalmology will continue to have an impact into the foreseeable future,” added Uday Devgan, MD, in private practice, Los Angeles.

During his career, Dr. Nordan had also been on the editorial board of *Cataract & Refractive Surgery Today*, and also worked to establish the Thomas H. Pettit Fund at UCLA, which supports the activities of the Cornea-External Ocular Disease Division. Dr. Nordan also received \$1 million from Johnson and Johnson for a medical technology venture. He also was an early investor in the South Beach Beverage Co. (SOBE), Norwalk, CT, which was eventually sold to PepsiCo in 2000.

Whether his colleagues call him the “Muhammad Ali,” “Sylvester Stallone,” or “Jedi Master” of ophthalmology, they can all agree on one thing: Dr. Nordan was a legend, and there will never be another quite like him.

His legacy will live on in his wife, Helen; his sons, Taylor and Andre; and in all those lives he touched over the course of his life and career.