

S. Walter Askinas, Dental Professor Emeritus and Former Executive Dean, Dies at 92

A renaissance man, Askinas brought energy and enthusiasm to Tufts after a military career



By the time S. Walter Askinas arrived at Tufts School of Dental Medicine in 1983, he had already had a long and successful career as a prosthodontist in the U.S. Air Force's dental service. As it turns out, he was just gearing up for his second act.

During his fourteen years at the dental school, he earned a reputation as an inspiring teacher, an endlessly energetic administrator—and the guy who was at One Kneeland Street at five o'clock every morning. Askinas, professor emeritus and former executive dean, died April 2 at his home in Boynton Beach, Florida, at age ninety-two.

"He was very, very passionately committed to his students," said his stepson, Richard Herman, A73, M77. "Everybody at Tufts whom he touched has a story."

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"He was extremely supportive of the next generation," added Mark Gonthier, executive associate dean at the dental school.

In 1995, Askinas was appointed executive dean, joining Lonnie Norris, DG80, who had just been named interim dean of the School of Dental Medicine. (Norris would go on to serve as dean until 2011.) "I will forever appreciate [former provost] Sol Gittleman's decision for putting together our leadership team," Norris said.

"In the previous twelve years, Dr. Askinas and I had served on various committees, but not worked directly together," Norris recalled. "However, after becoming deans, we were very compatible and discussed everything together for decision making. His leadership experience, ability to implement plans, and devotion to advance all aspects of the school were valued by all, and especially by me. I enjoyed his intellectual insights, positive attitude, sense of humor, and friendship."

Norris presented Askinas with one of the first Dean's Medals, the highest honor awarded by each school at Tufts. His legacy lives on at the School of Dental Medicine through the S. Walter Askinas Student Prize for Integrity and Citizenship, established in 1999 by his family, friends, and colleagues in his honor, which is presented annually to a graduating student.

In his early years at Tufts, Askinas was a professor and chair of restorative dentistry. Gonthier, the former associate dean for admissions and student affairs, remembers the students lining up outside Askinas's office in the morning to have their dentures reviewed. "He would use a surveyor [a precision instrument] to assess their work. In that way, he was very old-school."

Askinas moved into the dental school leadership in 1995 at a financially critical time for the institution. "He was a stalwart as the school went through difficult times," said Tufts Executive Vice President Patricia Campbell, who became executive associate dean of the dental school during the final years of Askinas's tenure. "He was always open to new ideas. He had a sense of humor; he was very smart and very kind, and he was a really important leader for the school."

Askinas was a man of many skills, Campbell said, and was eager to share them. "He taught me how to change a tire on my bicycle," she said. "He could do just about anything."

He also was a recreational pilot; a lover of fast cars; and an avid cyclist who continued riding twenty-five miles a day into his mid-eighties. In his travels with the Air Force, he made friends all over the world, his stepson said. He kept in touch with many former Tufts students. "He didn't have any kids of his own, and I think his students became his kids in a way," Herman said.

After his first wife, Frances Roslyn Cooper Askinas, died, he married his high school classmate—and former crush—Mae Herman, whom he reconnected with after their fiftieth reunion. After their marriage, "my mother whisked him off to Florida to play bridge and sit in the sun," Herman said. "But that didn't happen." It was time for Askinas's next act. The newly opened dental school at Nova Southeastern University, in Fort Lauderdale, convinced him to return to academia, and he became the chair of restorative dentistry.

In 2008, he became Nova Southeastern dental's first professor emeritus. "He was a great man," said Gonthier, who spoke at the ceremony bestowing the honor, on behalf of Tufts. "He was a role model for me in my career."

Askinas grew up in Hartford, Connecticut, and received a B.S. in biology from Yale University in 1945. He graduated from New York University College of Dentistry in 1949 and opened a private practice before entering the Air Force in 1956, eventually reaching the rank of colonel. He was a prosthodontist in the dental service, and earned the Legion of Merit, the highest noncombat award given by the Air Force.

He is survived by his wife, Mae; his stepsons Richard, Barry, M80, and Jonathan; four grandchildren and two cousins.