

Dr. Tom Little – 2010 International Optometrist of the Year

The World Council of Optometry (WCO) announced on September 22nd, 2010, that its annual International Optometrist of the Year Award is to be post-humously awarded to Dr. Tom Little, who was killed whilst leading a humanitarian health mission in Nuristan province, Afghanistan.

Each year, this prestigious award recognises an individual who has shown 'outstanding commitment and contribution to both the profession of optometry and the community at large'.

Professor George Woo, President of the World Council of Optometry commenting on the award said "Dr. Little had dedicated his life to providing eye and vision care in a very difficult and challenging environment. Our thoughts are with his family, friends and colleagues, and the WCO is proud to recognise Dr. Little as an outstanding individual and professional."

Dr. Little was working for International Assistance Mission. It

is estimated that International Assistance eye care work has benefited an estimated 5 million Afghans since 1966.

Originally from Kinderhook, New York, Dr. Tom Little had worked in Afghanistan for more than 30 years. He was a former member of the WCO Public Health Committee and had presented at the 2008 WCO World Optometric Globalisation Conference in London. He was a graduate of the Advanced Standing International Program at New England College of Optometry and an adjunct faculty member of the college. He was also involved in Volunteer Services for Optometry/International (VOSH) and was due to speak at their annual meeting in October 2010.

This award was recognised at the WCO's World Conference on Optometric Education, held September 22nd to the 24th, 2010, in Durban, South Africa.



the optical lab and the clinic. He always found time for that even when it meant spending late nights, sometimes by gas lamp, finishing other jobs.

As the security situation declined, fewer and fewer organizations and people were left to do the work but Tom and Libby stayed to do what could still be done to keep eye care accessible to those who needed it in Kabul and in the outlying provinces. Many would say today, that had it not been for Tom the eye work in Afghanistan would have totally collapsed. In later years when the people and the organizations began to return Tom and Libby were there to welcome them.

Much of Tom's career was without formal training. His father was an ophthalmologist in a small town in upstate New York. Unusually, he had a special interest in refracting and taught Tom and employed him in his office as an assistant and an

BY CHIP PARKER

Tom Little walked into the optical laboratory at the NOOR Eye Institute sometime in 1977 with a small bag of optical tools and stated that he was a licensed optician from New York and was wondering if he could be of help. He was there on another mission but had some free time. He started coming on a regular basis. Some months later he told me that the project he was working on was closing and asked if I had more work for him. I said that we did but didn't realize that there would be 33 years of it! None of us had any idea what that would mean.

From the days before the Russians first came in 1978, through the Russian invasion and subsequent withdrawal, the civil war crisis, early 90's, the Taliban, late 90's, the American invasion post 9/11, until his death, August 5 2010, Tom found something to do working through virtually every job at the hospital and clinics except surgery. He organized and oversaw the training of surgeons, nurses, technicians; he set up Afghanistan's first ophthalmic manufacturing pharmacy. He recruited visiting professors and short term personnel. He managed the hospital administration while carrying on a clinical load. His love was

optician. Tom came to Kabul with that experience and all his pre-med requirements, a couple of Master's degrees in unrelated fields, but no professional credentials beyond his optician's license. He started working with me in the clinic and I monitored his work and saw him strengthen in his clinical skills. We had a good library in our teaching hospital so it served almost as an independent residency program for Tom. In the early 2000's Tom found a window in his schedule and started to work toward getting a degree in optometry. The World Council was kind enough to invite and sponsor him to some of their conferences. At one of these, I spoke to Bina Patel and David Heath of New England College of Optometry (NECO) and told him of Tom's unique background.

We all met together in Orlando at a WCO conference in the early 2000's. One of my arguments was, "Professionally we want to claim this guy as one of ours." The profession can now be proud that we can. With credit to David and Bina, who supported Tom's request, Tom was admitted to the NECO accelerated program. I don't think they were disappointed. Tom received his degree with honors and went back to Afghanistan professionally strengthened and now credentialed to do the work he had been doing all his life.

There is so much more to the story. The faith that brought him to Afghanistan, Tom's expression of his faith by his deeds, adventures that would make Indiana Jones look like a wimp—the deep and abiding friendships, the cold, the

bullets, artillery shells and bombs, the diseases, the poor food, and the thousands of people he helped that otherwise would have been blind.

In a world where so much is said and so little is done Tom chose to say little and do much. Afghanistan and all who's lives he touched will miss him and mourn his death but be gladdened and encouraged by a life that was well lived.

Chip Parker was an active participant in the WCO from 1999 till 2006 serving on the International Development Committee. He was a friend of Tom's from the beginning of Tom's work in Afghanistan in 1977 and their lives and work have been intertwined since then. In addition to Afghanistan, Chip has worked for extended periods in Sri Lanka and Jordan with shorter terms in numerous other countries.

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