A Lifetime of Guidance: Honoring My Father and Mentor, Howard Shaffer

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Editor's note: *Paige M. Shaffer, PhD, MPH, is an Assistant Professor in the Division of Health Systems Science, Department of Medicine, at UMass Chan Medical School. She is also an experienced epidemiologist with over 15 years in state government, academic, non-profit, and private sectors. Dr. Shaffer's research focuses on vulnerable populations with addiction, gambling disorder, mental health, and particularly populations with comorbid disorders and testing integrated treatment approaches. This op-ed is part of our Special Series in Honor of Dr. Howard Shaffer.*

It is my privilege to call my dad, Howard Shaffer, a mentor. It has been a unique opportunity to observe you over the course of my lifetime, and it is an honor to now reflect on your impact. Your unwavering commitment to your values, your work, and your family has been a living example of integrity and purpose. You've taught me—through both words and actions—what it means to lead with humility, to listen with compassion, and to act with conviction. The lessons I've learned from you have shaped who I am, and I carry them with me every day.

As a kid, I remember the days when you would bring me to the Division, and I would help "file paperwork." Those days were remarkably special to me—we had extra time together, which often included eating Chinese food from the food truck at the medical school or going to the Harvard Coop to get music tapes. Yes dad, at that time tapes existed ☺. Reflecting on those times now, I realize I was learning much more than I knew then.

I observed your diligence and unwavering dedication to a cause that mattered

deeply. The common thread I saw was your desire to alleviate suffering and to equip people with tools to reshape their lives. One of the cornerstones of your work ethic was your commitment to doing things thoroughly and never cutting corners. These values weren't just something you talked about—they were principles you lived by.

I've seen these same qualities consistently throughout my life, and to say I look up to you is an understatement. These experiences—and your example—have profoundly shaped the way I think about public health and the way I approach my own career.

I'm sure it's no surprise to anyone reading this that I—and the entire Shaffer family—have, at times, sacrificed moments and experiences with Howard. His steadfast dedication to science, psychology, and most importantly, to patients, has always been a defining part of who he is. Howard never does anything halfway—he is always 100% committed, whether it's his work or perfecting his golf game.

Looking back now, as a mom and someone working in academia myself, I have an even deeper respect for how he made everything work. Dad, I now realize the full extent of what you sacrificed. You never missed a single important moment in my life—the joyful ones, the difficult ones, and everything in between. And somehow, you managed to be fully present for me without ever letting anything else slip through the cracks. Thank you—for every opportunity you've given me, for every quiet sacrifice, and for showing me what true dedication looks like.

Dad, you have been my rock—always steadfast as I navigated life's challenges. You have led by example, both personally and professionally, showing me what it means to live with integrity, passion, and purpose. You are a tremendous role model, and through you, I've learned the true meaning of determination and perseverance. You've inspired me to continually strive to be the best version of myself, and I know I would not be where I am today without your unwavering love and encouragement. You instilled in me a deep love for learning, a passion for science, and a lasting

understanding of the importance of service to others.

Although this particular chapter is coming to a close for you, your legacy is far from over—you have left an indelible mark on me and on everyone fortunate enough to cross your path. Dad, you have reshaped the way the field understands addiction, and in doing so, you have touched countless lives. Your impact will live on through the patients you've helped, their families and communities, and through the many mentees you've guided and inspired.

As I look ahead on my own career journey, I promise you that I'm 100% in. I will carry forward your passion, your integrity, and your commitment to the science of addiction. My hope is to make a lasting impact in your honor—and I know I'll never be doing it alone. Your voice, your values, and your example will always be with me. You continue to inspire me every single day.

– Paige M. Shaffer, PhD, MPH