
Emile L. Gebel, MD

The Foundation of My Success

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Emile L. Gebel". The signature is written in a light gray color and is centered on the page.

Duke's greatness commenced when the founders created a university with significant graduate schools for undergraduates. The original building plan was not finished until the 1950s, when I matriculated at Trinity College. As I remember, the single medical research facility was the Bell Building! Since, millions of square feet of important research/teaching space have been added such that alums who have not visited for years could not navigate the campus.

Duke's ascension towards the highest echelon of research universities accelerated during my years there: 1953-1966. The wisdom of the founders in locating the campus within a huge forested tract was prescient. In the 1950s—as I recall it—*TIME* ran a complimentary article about Duke, ending with the comment that Duke needed only to grow old. Indeed that has happened overnight!

I benefited from the changing of the guard while at Duke—especially as a house officer in medicine and ophthalmology. Banks Anderson

Sr. and J.A.C. Wadsworth approached teaching and surgical technique differently—but each with rewarding experiences for residents. My personal contact with Eugene Stead and “Steadisms” resonate yet today in our plant nursery where I now work.

There are some Duke alums who do not return to campus and some who do not contribute funds, even though their educational experience was greatly subsidized at Duke. Truth is, the foundation of their success is the Duke medical-school degree. The Duke experience speaks for itself. Almost weekly do I find a mention of Duke in a positive way within some well-read medium such as the *Wall Street Journal*. To construct a university in a relatively remote location and attain the excellent position recognized by others—in less than 100 years—has not been duplicated in the United States.

A significant part of medical education at Duke involved active participation by students and interns in patient care, such as starting and maintaining IVs, drawing blood, and certain lab work assignments called scut work: urinalysis and hematologic studies plus microscopic slide reviews of various types. Shortly following my medical internship year (1962-1963), Stead greatly reduced these tasks, yet they remained for surgical interns to accomplish. When I was chief resident in ophthalmology, the chief surgical resident asked me to approach Dr. Gardner about deleting these tasks for surgical interns. (I was asked to approach him because there were no interns on ophthalmology; we had no ax to grind.)

I made an appointment with him over lunch. Eventually he asked me, “What’s this about, Gebel?”

I explained the situation, whereupon he went into a long speech about how it was when he came along. I fumbled in my mind for a response and came up with this:

“Well, Röntgen took his own x-rays.”

He all of a sudden moved back in his chair and said, “Indeed, I get it!” That ended scut work on surgery.

I’ve no idea vis-à-vis the research opportunities available to medical students at other universities during my time as a Duke student. Being married, leaving Durham for the summer was not an option. My wife, Barbara, worked in research for various Duke people: Drs. Anlyan, Hart, and Chick. I got a position in physiology with Wheland Hull and E. Croft Long doing pulmonary research. This led to numerous papers, including one at an international physiology conference in Leiden, Netherlands. I toyed with the idea of going into medical research—even in ophthalmology. I had done some research with Banks Anderson Jr. with hyperbaric oxygenation and retinal blood flow.

Speaking of that tool, when in Holland I had a chance to “dive” in the first large chamber dedicated to surgical research, which was in Amsterdam. But I opted eventually for private practice, thinking back to what my section head at Gulf Oil told me before I entered medical school.

One day after lunch, as we walked to our research building, he asked me to hold back. He told me to meet with the personnel director and stop by his office to let him know of the meeting.

I did so and told my section head what had taken place.

“Well,” I said, “He offered me the moon. He said, ‘Go to Pitt or Carnegie Tech, get your PhD, two years and out, Gulf will pay for it, do your research here, and get full pay at the same time.’”

Dr. Pellegrini, my section head, then said this:

“I think you might have a secondary interest in medicine. You do not part your hair the right way and will never get a top job with Gulf. Consider medical school.”

Of course I did.



Emile Gebel spent 13 years at Duke, receiving his bachelor's degree in chemistry from Trinity College in 1958, medical degree in 1962, and serving on the medicine and ophthalmology house staff from 1962 to 1966. Gebel is a past president of the Duke Medical Alumni Association and the Davison Club. He remains a supporter of Duke through Shagreen Nursery & Arboretum, his nursery business in Shelby, North Carolina. His fundraising ventures include grafting dawn redwood trees (as represented in the Sarah P. Duke Gardens) and selling the specimens with all proceeds to Duke.