

NORTHEASTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OKLAHOMA COLLEGE OF OPTOMETRY

# Full Scope

ISSUE 1 | 2023

Future forward.  
Future *focused*.

# From the President



## Greetings NSUOCO alumni and friends,

More than four decades ago, Northeastern State University officials and tribal leaders with the Cherokee Nation saw a need for comprehensive and quality eye care in northeastern Oklahoma. Their shared vision became a reality in 1979 with the establishment of the Oklahoma College of Optometry, one of 23 optometric colleges in the nation and the only one in Oklahoma.

Since then, this mutually beneficial relationship has ensured that Cherokee citizens and everyone living in Green Country have close access to state-of-the-art eye care. And at the same time, NSUOCO students and residents experience tremendous immersive learning opportunities, including providing eye care to over 40,000 patients annually.

These learning opportunities are the backbone of our world-class program. They include primary eye care, specialized low vision therapy, infant vision, vision therapy, contact lenses, laser treatments and ocular disease management at clinics across Oklahoma.

Our NSUOCO students and faculty also conduct eye screenings for local schools, work with Special Olympics athletes and lead international opportunities with Students Volunteering Optometric Services to Humanity, which has planned 11 international optometric mission trips.

Learning doesn't stop after graduation. NSUOCO has stepped up to become the nation's continuing education leader in advanced procedures, including laser and surgical. In addition to their regional and local events, NSUOCO has delivered their Ophthalmic Procedures Course to professionals in more than 30 states, two Canadian provinces and London in the last decade.

Whether you're a proud graduate of our nationally recognized program, a past resident who expanded your marketability with a post-graduate residency certification, an optometry professional who takes advantage of NSUOCO's CE events or a longtime supporter who believes in our institution's mission—please know that YOU are an integral part of the NSUOCO vision in Oklahoma and beyond.

I look forward to welcoming you back soon as we break ground on the next chapter of NSUOCO's exciting history. The vision continues.

Dr. Steve Turner  
NSU President



# Full Scope

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For more than 40 years the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry has provided a nationally recognized optometry education to its students and comprehensive vision services to communities in northeastern Oklahoma.

Here, dedicated and caring faculty have been educating the next generation of world-class optometrists for an evolving scope of practice using the highest technology available. The college also offers post-graduate clinical residency certification and is a leader in continuing optometric education.

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# From the Dean



Welcome to the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry's (NSUOCO) first publication of Full Scope. We plan to mail this out once a year so all our college alumni, friends and supporters will have a hard copy piece of which they can enjoy and share. This publication will be complemented at other times during the year with email newsletters on the activities and developments at NSUOCO. We hope you enjoy this inaugural publication.

NSUOCO has a long and rich heritage. Starting with the matriculation of the first entering class in 1979 and our long partnership with the Cherokee Nation, the college has become the nation's leader in the training of optometric physicians in the evolving full scope of optometric practice and this tradition is going strong to this day.

So, how did this happen? Numerous factors have contributed to this source of continued pride. First, and foremost, has been the long commitment and dedication of the college with the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians to provide the citizens of Oklahoma with the finest and broadest vision care by optometric physicians. The third member of the triumvirate which has assured the highest level of training and patient care has been the Oklahoma Board of Examiners in Optometry. The visionary leaders of the college, association and the board led the way to where NSUOCO is today and we must not ever forget that. My thanks and recognition to those who blazed the trail will never be enough.

As a result of this legacy, here we are at NSUOCO today with a fantastic and dedicated faculty and staff who not only teach full scope optometry—they also deliver this care to our patients. I don't believe there is, or could be, any better environment for student and resident optometric training. Thank you, trail blazers.

However, one critical item in this history has been missing since the first day in 1979. A facility to match this world-class educational program. That is about to change.

In just a few months, NSU will break ground for the construction of a newly designed vision care facility for the Oklahoma College of Optometry. This will be a first for NSUOCO having always been housed and retro-fitted into existing structures. I hope you will join us and follow this continuing journey of even better things to come from your Oklahoma College of Optometry at Northeastern State University.

Thank you for your continued support!

Douglas K. Penisten O.D., Ph.D.  
Dean

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### ON THE COVER

An NSUOCO faculty member performs an ultrasound biomicroscopy (UBM) scan which provides advanced and state-of-the-art imaging for the front half of the eye.

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## FACILITY UPDATE

# New facility to improve patient care, enhance student instruction

Over the past four decades, the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry has transformed vision services in northeast Oklahoma and, through its graduates, communities in Oklahoma and beyond.

Plans to build upon the optometry college's success has led NSU officials to propose the construction of a new facility to house the program and expand upon its legacy.

"The time has come for our nationally-recognized program's facilities to reflect the first-class instruction, top-rated vision services and growth the program has experienced these past four decades," NSU President Steve Turner said. "A new facility will allow us to expand and enhance patient care and instruction to ensure NSUOCO remains a leader in the optometry field."

The latest proposal calls for a 85,000-square-foot complex divided into an academic and clinical wing. The most recent estimates are to build and equip such a facility at a little more than \$36 million. Proposed amenities include additional exam lanes, labs, classrooms, clinical conference rooms, seminar rooms, an auditorium and optical shop.

### ENHANCED PATIENT CARE

Visitors to the new facility's clinical wing can expect both generalized and specialty eye care services as well as new services such as refractive surgery.

Associate Dean of the Oklahoma College of Optometry and optometry professor Dr. Nate Lighthizer said a new facility will increase the number of clinical exam lanes which will increase the number of patients that can be seen. He added proposed care from the facility will cover children to seniors.

Potential services include general checkups, low vision services, vision therapy, infant eye care and eye disease treatment. There are also plans to have an optical shop to make it convenient for patients to purchase the latest in glasses and contact lenses. NSU officials are also hopeful to bring refractive surgery services to Tahlequah with the addition of a new refractive surgery laser. This will allow for optometrists to use a laser to correct vision problems such as myopia and astigmatism.

The new facility will complement other comprehensive and specialty services ongoing at the various NSUOCO clinics throughout Green Country that currently serve more than 40,000 patients annually.

"Our mission is to train first class optometry students to become first-class optometric physicians that provide the best care for the citizens of Oklahoma and the surrounding states," Lighthizer said. "So, from both the classroom and clinical perspective, this new facility will greatly help achieve our goals of increasing services available to patients and providing the best classroom and clinical education for our students."





## ENHANCED INSTRUCTION

Future optometry students can expect expanded immersive learning opportunities with a new facility. Also, officials envision a new facility bolstering its continuing education program.

Lighthizer said the new facility is being designed to accommodate up to 40 students as officials expect the need for trained optometrists to grow in the coming decades. Currently, the college accepts up to 28 students into the college each year.

The proposed academic wing of the new facility will expand the number of classrooms, seminar rooms and computer labs available to better instruct optometry students. Officials also look to expand the number of mock exam lanes and labs to provide more hands-on experiences for students. In addition, there are plans for two replica National Board of Examiners in Optometry exam rooms to give students a leg up on clinical board examinations necessary for optometric licensure in the United States.

Officials also view the new facility as helping to expand the college's capability to train optometrists on a variety of office based procedures and techniques.

The college has a reputation of providing hands-on training in the latest ophthalmic procedures for optometrists. NSUOCO faculty has been sought after to train hundreds in these procedures. Currently, faculty travel on a regular basis across the country training optometrists on laser procedures, injections around the eye, eyelid lump and bump removal and more. For 2023, faculty members have already traveled to optometry schools in southern California and Alabama to train optometry faculty, students and residents.

"We really stand on the shoulders of the leaders that have come before us. We've had a tremendous number of leaders in Oklahoma optometry that have paved the way over the last 40 years and because of that we have had the most progressive scope of practice in the United States," Lighthizer said. "It's really a feather in the cap of the Oklahoma College of Optometry."

Lighthizer said the interest in receiving this training is growing as well as the desire to expand such training opportunities locally. However, with growing class sizes and limited space, current facilities are at capacity to conduct the training at the college. Participation in such courses at the college are limited to around 50 with existing space. He said a new facility would allow them to train more people at once and on the latest technology, as well as provide other continuing education opportunities.

NSUOCO partners with the Oklahoma Association of Optometric Physicians to host the annual Converge conference that brings together optometric physicians, paraoptometrics, student doctors and vendors to network and learn from experts across the country. The new conference combined the OAOP Fall Conference and the NSUOCO Winter Symposium into one event. Since the inaugural conference in 2021, Lighthizer said officials hope a new facility would allow for future conferences to take place at the optometry school in the state. Currently, the conference is hosted in Tulsa.

"A new facility is only going to make it even more attractive to come to Oklahoma to get the training from the leader in this area," Lighthizer said. "It gives us more space, allows us to have better technology and to continue to push ourselves forward so we can help others as well."

## NARROWING IN ON THE VISION

NSU officials discussed finding a new home for the Oklahoma College of Optometry back in 2016 to better address space needs for the growing program. Currently, the program is housed in the old W.W. Hastings Hospital.

Efforts to find facilities to better accommodate the program led to NSU officials launching the "Building Excellence: A Vision for the Future" fundraising campaign in 2021 to drum up financial support. Since launching the fundraising effort, NSU has secured support from various stakeholders to help make the new home a reality.

This includes, but is not limited to, the Oklahoma House of Representatives and Senate (\$15 million), the Cherokee Nation (\$5 million), the Masonic Charity Foundation of Oklahoma (\$250,000) and private donations from faculty, staff, alumni and other friends of the university.

"The support for a new home for the Oklahoma College of Optometry has been humbling," Turner said. "None of this would be possible without the vision and support from faculty, staff, legislators, tribal leaders, alumni and NSU supporters. I'm excited for what the future holds as we move the college into its next chapter."

To learn more about the project and to support it visit [nsugiving.com/OCOVision](https://nsugiving.com/OCOVision). 



## FACULTY/STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

# Vanilla Ice makes guest appearance in NSUOCO “Eyes Eyes Baby” parody music video

When Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry students reimagined the classic 1990s hip hop song “Ice Ice Baby” for the 2022 Optometry Student Bowl Hype video they were not expecting a cameo from the artist.

“I was thrilled,” NSUOCO student Nathan Kuykendall said. “I had been told there was a ‘surprise’ for us at the beginning of the video, but I had no idea it was going to include such an epic feature.”

After winning the Spirit Award at the 2021 American Optometric Student Association Student Bowl, NSUOCO students were charged with creating a hype video for the following 2022 bowl in Chicago. Kuykendall said the team drafted ideas for multiple songs before finally picking “Eyes Eyes Baby.”

Students were allowed access to a professional film crew and they filmed “Eyes Eyes Baby” at different sites in Tahlequah including NSUOCO clinics, classrooms, labs and the assistant dean’s pool.

After 10 hours of shooting, NSUOCO student Jenna Dougherty said they were brainstorming how they wanted the video to start and among the suggestions was to open it with someone scrolling TikTok and request Vanilla Ice through Cameo, an app that allows users to request a personalized video message from thousands of celebrities.

“None of us thought anything would come of it, but when the video started in Chicago and Vanilla Ice popped up on screen, we all started screaming,” Dougherty said. “This was one of my favorite memories while in school. It’s one of the most unique experiences I’ve ever had the privilege to be a part of.”

As “the best optometry music video ever created,” according to Kuykendall, the song features the hidden talents of various students who provided the vocals and dance moves for the music video.

Dougherty choreographed the dances used in the music video. She started dancing competitively at eight years old and was the captain of her high school dance team and a member of the Wichita State Dance Team as an undergraduate student.

Dougherty said while she had choreographed several routines, this was her first music video. She added she used the original music video for inspiration. Kuykendall said shooting this video is also a highlight in his optometry school career.

“The journey of planning and filming the music video will by far rank as one of the most memorable experiences in my optometry school career,” Kuykendall said. “Other experiences that rank among this will be the first eye exam I gave and traveling with classmates to national optometry conferences.”



As both look to move on to the next chapter of their optometric journey, both Kuykendall and Dougherty recommend going to NSU for optometry school.

Dougherty said NSU is an amazing school, adding the class sizes make it easier to build connections with professors and experiences with classmates feel like having a second family.

“I feel like we find the perfect balance of work and play and it keeps the stress of school manageable,” Dougherty said.

She plans to move back home to Wichita and work in a group practice. She added she has a special interest in pediatrics and vision rehabilitation.

Kuykendall said the close doctor-to-student relationship at NSUOCO is one of the reasons he would recommend the college.

“In addition, there is a high volume of patients students get to care for throughout their clinical training,” Kuykendall said. “As icing on the cake, the cost of living in Tahlequah is very affordable and has been a great place for my family over the past few years.”

He plans to join a private practice in his hometown of Claremore after optometry school to live out his mission of “helping others to make the most of their vision, so they can make the most of their life.”

To watch the “Eyes Eyes Baby” on YouTube, scan the QR code with your mobile device’s camera. 

SCAN HERE



## FACULTY/STUDENT HIGHLIGHTS

# Pickleball tournament raises funds for NSUOCO students, Lions Club



More than 30 teams participated in the inaugural Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry Pickleball Doubles Tournament last September.

NSUOCO Student Association President Dalton Cunningham said 31 registered teams participated. Representatives with the Oklahoma Optometric Student Association and the Lions Club of Tahlequah helped organize the fundraising event.

“It went better than expected,” Cunningham said. “Our multiple sponsors also came through for us too and the tournament wouldn’t have been possible without them.”

Cunningham said the tournament was able to raise almost \$2,000 for the Oklahoma Optometric Student Association. Profits will help develop and promote the education of future optometrists through travel grants for members to represent NSUOCO at local and national optometric events. In addition, funds raised will also be used to support the Lions Club of Tahlequah so it can continue to purchase and provide eyewear for those in need in the community.

“We are one of the few optometry schools in the nation that have an organization like the OOSA that actively searches for ways to help students attend events to advocate for our future profession and also network with doctors around the nation,” Cunningham said. “Many other schools let their students fund themselves for optometric events with little to no help. We are proud and fortunate to have this association here at Northeastern State.”

Cunningham said NSUOCO intends to make the tournament an annual fundraising event and grow participation. He said it helps that pickleball is one of the fastest growing sports in America and many optometry students and faculty are interested in the sport, which requires little skill to play. The event also takes advantage of the newly installed pickleball courts at Kaufman Park in Tahlequah.

To learn more about the NSUOCO Student Association, visit [optometry.nsuok.edu/CurrentStudents/Organizations](https://optometry.nsuok.edu/CurrentStudents/Organizations). 

# NSUOCO returns to Honduras to provide life-changing vision care

Since 2009 the Oklahoma College of Optometry at Northeastern State University (NSUOCO) has given its students and faculty a unique opportunity to serve others through optometric services on mission trips.

Dr. Alissa Proctor, optometrist and NSUOCO faculty member, has been involved with the mission since the group's inaugural trip.

This was not her first time on an optometric mission trip though. Proctor journeyed to Nigeria as an optometry student and later to Brazil as a resident to provide vision services to those in need.

As an optometry instructor, Proctor would share stories of her mission trips with her students who also expressed interest in serving others through a similar type of trip.

"My vision was greater than just one trip," Proctor said. "I wanted a student-led group who would work year-round to fundraise for trips, plan for trips, eventually graduate and take that knowledge to lead their own trips, perhaps with some of our students in the future."

Proctor along with student leaders formed the NSUOCO chapter of Students Volunteering Optometric Services to Humanity (SVOSH), which is the student subset of VOSH International. From there the student organization grew and evolved, establishing student leadership and drafting bylaws that would help the group's mission of serving others.

In 2009 the group's hard work and dedication was realized as Proctor along with one other OD who had completed their residency affiliated with NSUOCO led nine optometry students on their first mission to Roatan, Honduras.

Following this inaugural trip, the group returned to Roatan each year for the next decade with the exception of 2010 when they traveled to Guatemala. Over the years NSUOCO and SVOSH established a strong partnership with a local host and clinic in Roatan where they offered no-cost vision services.

Just as they did for the rest of the world, things changed for the group after 2019 due to the pandemic, which prevented them from traveling.

In 2022 though SVOSH, faculty and alumni and even a couple family members were ready to return to Roatan for their yearly mission.

In Roatan the group provided no-charge eye exams to the local residents on a first-come, first-served basis. At the conclusion of the eye exam, patients received donated prescription glasses,

reading glasses, sunglasses and medications they might need to treat the conditions diagnosed during the exam.

The NSUOCO volunteers also referred patients for cataract surgery or further care, like glaucoma or diabetic issues, managed with the Clinica Esperanza in Roatan.

"As a teacher, I find it rewarding to take students out of their comfort zone and provide them a learning experience unlike any other," Proctor said. "There is a steep learning curve but they pick up the skills they need fast and quickly are doing the exam, sometimes in Spanish. They are better clinicians when they return home because of it and they see conditions or advanced states of diseases they may not always see in the USA."


Over the course of four clinic days the group provided care to over 730 patients, dispensed over 700 pairs of sunglasses and nearly 700 pairs of glasses for distance vision, near vision and bifocal prescriptions.

Aubry Tackett, a fourth-year optometry student and previous president of SVOSH who led the group on their most recent trip in the summer of 2022, was able to see firsthand the magnitude of providing services and tools to help people see more clearly.

"Seeing the reactions of the patients as they receive their glasses and are able to see or as you discuss with them that you are referring for cataract surgery which will clear up their vision really puts into perspective how much we have to offer as ODs or future ODs," Tackett said.

While the NSUOCO group has undoubtedly made a positive impact on the community of Roatan, they too have gained something significant during their time with the locals.

SVOSH, along with NSUOCO as a whole, are working to train future optometrists who recognize the importance of the care they provide to the different populations they serve.

"You will never be sorry for giving up your time to help others in need. If you are at all considering participating in medical missions I urge you to take the plunge," Tackett said. "SVOSH is a wonderful organization that is the perfect place to start. Not only do we focus on raising funds to take mission trips, but also on providing students with tools to continue doing medical missions after graduation. I was able to use the Spanish I had learned on the trip when helping at Optometry Gives Sight Day here in the states at a local optometrist's office. The skills you learn through SVOSH are invaluable to your day to day practice as well." 

**"You will never be sorry for giving up your time to help others in need."**

**Aubry Tackett**  
Optometry student









NSUOCO alumni find

# Endless opportu

after  
graduation



# nities

**Dr. Alex Helsley knew she wanted to be an optometrist from the age of seven.**

“There was something so interesting about the human eye that drew me in,” she said.

From her hometown of Muldrow, Oklahoma, Helsley made her way to Northeastern State University to complete her undergraduate studies in health and human performance with a minor in pre-health to ensure she was prepared with the prerequisites required for optometry school.

Helsley graduated with her bachelor's from NSU in May of 2018 and began her optometry studies at NSU that fall.

Throughout her time at NSUOCO, Helsley had the opportunity to build friendships within the tight-knit class and learn from several faculty mentors. She emphasizes how important the people of NSUOCO were in contributing to her growth and success in optometry school.

“Mentors that I really looked up to as people and doctors include Drs. Alissa Proctor, Sarah Krein, April Parker and Jenna Lighthizer,” Helsley said. “They all played different roles in my academic career. They are amazing doctors and all-around

incredible people. I hope to practice like each of them and also lead my family outside of the clinic like I've seen each of them do with their own.”

Helsley graduated from NSUOCO in May 2022 and has since enjoyed the many opportunities her education has created. This is ideal for creating a balance between work and life with her husband and daughter who was born in August 2022. Her husband and fellow NSU alumni, Ryan, is a closer for the St. Louis Cardinals, which keeps their family on the move often.


Because of this, Helsley has her OD license in Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas so she can practice in a variety of locations. She currently contracts herself out to other optometrists who want to take vacation, sick days, maternity and other types of leave.

This unique work structure allows Helsley to spend plenty of time with her family, whether they are at the baseball field, traveling or spending time with their church family.

Helsley enjoys reading, working out, trying new restaurants with her family and is known for her homemade cinnamon rolls. She is also a huge fan of coffee and would even be interested in opening a coffee shop one day.

Helsley is able to follow all of these other passions while also continuing to do the optometric work she loves and serving her patients. Her story shows just one of the many paths those with an optometry degree from NSUOCO have the opportunity to take.

In the future, Helsley would like to open a clinic for vision therapy, something she grew to love during her optometry studies. She looks forward to continuing to help patients improve their vision and overall health throughout her career.

“The best part about this profession is being able to articulate how important your overall health is to patients,” Helsley said. “The eye is the only place we, as a provider, can look in the body and see how the blood vessels are impacted. We can gauge blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, etc. Almost everything can show up in the eye. A lot of people don't know that and I love getting to explain what I see as I'm going through my exam and expressing how important it is to take care of the body due to its close relation with eyesight.” 



# The path less traveled

Drs. Alan and Earlena McKee hope non-traditional journey to optometry careers inspires others to join the profession

Returning to school can be frightful for many adult learners but for Drs. Alan and Earlena McKee overcoming that trepidation has allowed them to have a rewarding career in optometry.

The veteran Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry professors' path to the optometry field was non-traditional. By the time they decided to pursue an optometric degree at NSUOCO they had been out of college for a few years.

However, with encouragement from friends and former bosses they were not deterred at the prospect of making a fresh career start later in life.

"Don't be afraid to come back to school after some time away," Earlena said. "We often have non-traditional students in the College of Optometry and they are often outstanding students. What details you fear you may have forgotten from your undergraduate classes are far outweighed by your experience from outside of school and your refreshed resolve to pursue this career."

When the McKees began their postsecondary education as students at Pittsburg State University in Kansas and the University of Kansas a career in optometry had not crossed their minds.

With plans to teach high school math and computer science, Earlena earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics education from PSU. During her teaching internship in her last semester, she worked part-time at an ophthalmologist's office after school as a transcriptionist. After completing her bachelor's degree, she decided to pursue a master's degree in mathematics at the University of Kansas instead of going on to teach. Earlena worked full-time at the ophthalmologist's office doing accounts payable and payroll until entering the master's program the following fall.

Like Earlena, Alan started his postsecondary career journey with other plans. His interest was a job in telecommunications and completed both a bachelor's and master's in electrical engineering at the University of Kansas.

After finishing graduate school, Alan and Earlena worked with the same ophthalmologist Earlena had already been working for, but this time they were also working with the doctor's business partner who was a psychiatrist to start a biofeedback clinic. The McKees were recruited for this project due to Alan's training as an electrical engineer to design the equipment and Earlena's as a teacher to design training protocols.

They did this work for about six months before the biofeedback company was dissolved. Coincidentally, the ophthalmologist's only technician was leaving around this time so the McKees were able to step in to fill that role within the practice.

The McKees worked in that ophthalmology practice for a couple of years as ophthalmic technicians but they were still searching for a path to careers that would be fulfilling to both of them.

"As we planned our exit from the practice, the ophthalmologist suggested we consider pursuing careers in optometry or ophthalmology," Earlena said.



They heeded their boss' advice and after about a year of completing the prerequisite courses while continuing to work as ophthalmic technicians, the McKees made the journey to Tahlequah to begin the next chapter of their education and careers.

The couple settled on coming to NSUOCO after learning about the quality of the school from a few fourth-year NSU optometry students who completed their external rotations at the clinic where they worked. They were also able to take advantage of receiving in-state tuition through a program with the state of Kansas.

During the years of their optometry studies the McKees enjoyed working with NSUOCO faculty and building friendships with classmates who they keep in touch with to this day.

"The friendships formed with classmates who we shared our lives with for four years are amazing. We still love getting to visit with them at meetings and sometimes their homes," Earlena said. "One of our favorite places to study was at Pettit Bay on Lake Tenkiller. It was a great, quiet place to get away from distractions and concentrate on studying. We also enjoyed watching the ducks, geese and deer in that area."

After graduating from NSUOCO, the McKees returned to Kansas to fulfill a four-year commitment they made to practice in their home state.

For eight years the McKees worked in private practice to improve the vision of their patients. A large part of their work included diagnosing and treating ocular disease and fitting patients for contact lenses. They also provided vision therapy and low vision services.


While they both enjoyed practicing optometry, there was still a calling for the couple to teach. So, when faculty positions opened up at NSUOCO, they knew they could follow both passions of practicing optometry and teaching students.

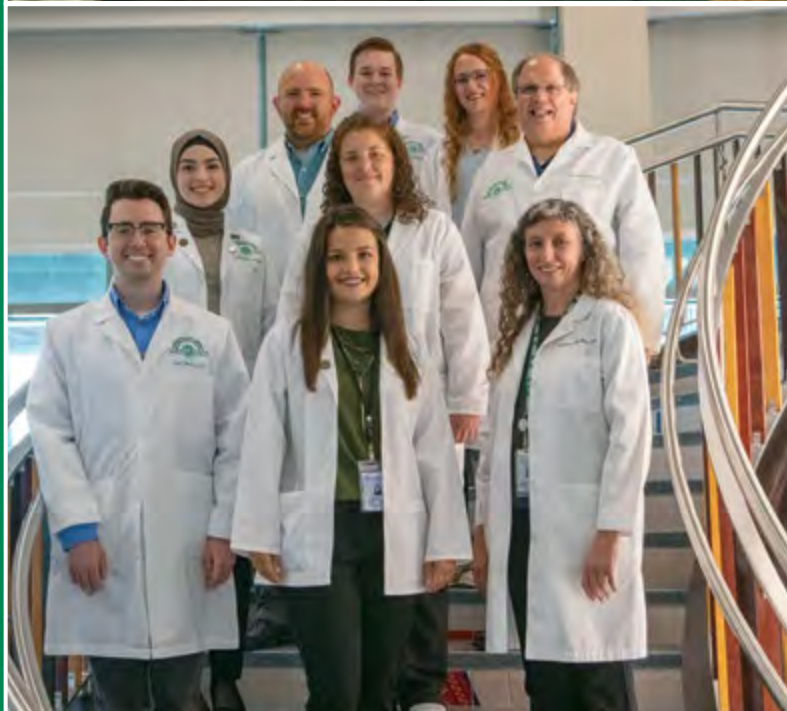
The McKees have now served as NSUOCO faculty for nearly 20 years and while their years of service can be measured, the impact they have had on their students, colleagues and patients in that time simply cannot.

Earlena currently serves as the Assistant Dean for Clinical Affairs, the Optometry Clinic Chief for the NSUOCO Pheiffer Eye Clinic at the Cherokee Nation Outpatient Health Center and teaches Ocular Disease III (vitreous, choroid and retina), Interpersonal Communications and Introduction to Clinic I and II at the college.

Alan serves as Director of Optical Services for the college. This role involves managing all nine Cherokee Nation and two NSU optical dispensaries in addition to the NSU spectacle fabrication lab which supplies spectacles for these eleven optical shops. He also teaches courses in ophthalmic optics, environmental vision and contact lenses. He is a clinical instructor in the NSUOCO clinics, Cherokee Nation W. W. Hastings Hospital and Outpatient Health Center and the Rural Eye Program.

The McKees hope that the story of how they came to become optometrists and eventually optometry professors reminds people that it's never too late to go back to school to follow your dreams.

"Pursue your passion," Alan said. "Returning to complete a degree program requires commitment but the life experiences gained in the real world are definitely an advantage." 



## MEET THE NSUOCO STUDENTS:

# Finding more ways to serve

Every year, the Northeastern State University Oklahoma College of Optometry welcomes up to 28 students into its program with the goal of training the next generation of optometrists. The students that walk through the doors of NSUOCO come from various backgrounds and each have different hopes and dreams as they look to build a career in optometry.

Below we hear from NSUOCO students Regina Veracruz and Mackenzie Zora. Both are United States veterans hoping to apply the skills they acquire through their optometric training to serving those who serve.

## Regina Veracruz

### CLASS OF 2024

#### Tell me a little about yourself

I served 11 years in the Navy as a type of maintenance man. When my contract finished I moved to Stilwell, Oklahoma because that is where my now ex-husband found work as a registered nurse. I was able to spend some time as a stay-at-home mom to my children for a while before life took a hard turn sideways. I then came to NSU to further my education.

#### What drew you to apply to NSU to study optometry?

I did my undergraduate work here at the NSU math department and for a while was unsure what would unfold as graduation approached. I was unaware that optometry even existed at that time. I was taking a walk with a friend from church one day when she saw someone she recognized, also from church, walking past the library. She made a comment about him working in the optometry school. I became a bit curious and started to research the field. As life would have it, someone close to me had their diabetes first found during an eye exam. Awhile later I was able to volunteer at Opening Eyes with the Special Olympics and watch a person's face light up like Christmas as they exclaimed, 'I can see!' I knew that this was something I wanted to do for people. As for how I ended up at OCO, the rest of the story is far more practical than magical. I was already here and had been an assistant in the Spectacle Fabrication Lab for a few years. All the pieces fell into place like something or someone wanted me to be here.

#### Can you briefly describe a couple highlights of your experience thus far and why they stand out?

I was struggling with my timing in clinic. I was quite detail oriented, but one of the slower clinicians. I got to work several weeks in a row, one on one, with a particular attending teacher. Through his guidance I was able to find not only what I was lacking, but ways to compensate for my weakness without compromising my strengths.







There was an exam I was doing where I saw something that was well beyond my understanding. My teacher was able to help me understand what it was that I was seeing. Happy ending. It was a funny looking something that had no effects on health or vision.

#### **How do you see the education you receive via NSUOCO helping you and others who serve?**

I would like to work on the disease side. I've always enjoyed challenges, things I can walk away from knowing that I've made a difference. I like the way things are somewhat stable and yet never the same. In my dream future, I will be able to attend a VA residency and be able to work directly with either the VA or the DoD. As I understand, they already need our services as optometric providers, but to do so with a veteran's experiences is a very different level.

## **Mackenzie Zora**

### **CLASS OF 2024**

#### **Tell me a little about yourself**

My name is Mackenzie Zora and I'm a third-year optometry student at NSUOCO. I'm originally from Flint, Michigan. I attended Point Loma Nazarene University, a small liberal arts college in San Diego for undergrad. I commissioned in 2022 as a 2LT in the US Air Force through their Health Professions Scholarship Program, meaning I will become an Air Force Optometrist after graduation. At NSUOCO I am involved in SVOSH, Bedlam clinics, Johnson & Johnson vision representative and tutoring. Out of class I enjoy outdoor activities, teaching Sunday school and traveling.

#### **What drew you to apply to NSU to study optometry?**

When I married my husband, a recently commissioned Army officer, I had no idea where in the country we'd end up. The Army brought us to Fort Sill, Oklahoma and naturally I applied to the closest optometry school. When I moved to Oklahoma it was my first time in the state and it grew on me, especially once I came to Tahlequah. As I looked more into NSU, I was convinced it was the right place for me with its small class size and reputation for clinical excellence. The school has lived up to its expectations with personable professors, ample clinic opportunities with both safety and consistency throughout the COVID pandemic. I'm grateful for the Cherokee community and their top-notch health care system that we can practice in. At other colleges I would not have gotten the individual academic attention that's so beneficial in a healthcare profession, nor would I have the leadership opportunities I have here.

#### **Can you briefly describe a couple highlights of your experience thus far and why they stand out?**

I'm passionate about helping the underserved and I was blessed with the opportunity to go with SVOSH on their trip to Roatan, Honduras this past summer. We gave comprehensive eye exams to 600 patients and dispensed hundreds of glasses. I saw conditions



that are not as common here and I pushed myself clinically more than ever. I also got to do some once-in-a-lifetime scuba diving.

I am a Bedlam clinic coordinator where we provide no cost diabetic eye exams once a month in Tulsa. I enjoy practicing my Spanish, encouraging good health habits and catching vision-threatening retinopathy and referring them to our volunteer ophthalmologist for treatment.

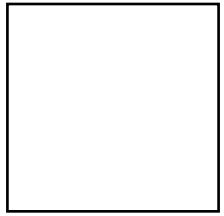
#### **How do you see the education you receive via NSUOCO helping you and others who serve?**

Right now, I am strongly considering staying in the Air Force and potentially retiring. I am unable to do the normal residency track with the Air Force, a year right after graduation, because they want me to start practicing. I can begin a residency program after three years of service and then dive more into a specific interest. I think that the education I get on patient care and the broad scope of practice will help me best treat service members wherever I find myself in my career. Being educated in Oklahoma is like having a Japanese passport, the possibilities are endless. 🙄



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