Building for Growth

Partners add third doctor and open new office as mid-career step
n a Thursday afternoon almost a year ago, Kerry Giedd, OD, MS, FAAO, and her practice partner of eight years, Brighid Williams, OD, closed the front door of the Orlando, Fla., practice location where they had been for six years. The next day, practice staff and friends grabbed boxes and furniture and delivered them to a new location just one mile away. The following Monday morning, they threw open the doors of the new Eola Eyes to patients.

Dr. Giedd and Dr. Williams opened their practice in 2003, in a historic house in a chic, residential area. In 2004, Hurricane Charley blew through, severely damaging the space. They moved to another converted house nearby. In these following six years, the practice grew, and the partners brought on an associate, Nicole Beedle, OD. “We told ourselves that if we had the opportunity to buy a place, we would,” Dr. Giedd says. That opportunity presented itself when they discovered a “diamond in the rough, 1960s building.” It was only a mile away from their current location—and they had acquired a most valuable asset in their landlord. He became a kind of project manager for the remodeling work that gutted the entire building and turned it into stunning, glass-fronted attention-grabber. “He was our gopher and did a tremendous amount of work, advising us where he could.”

A Dramatic Departure

When the women first saw the location that was to become their practice home, there was almost nothing attractive about it. “It was an abandoned commercial office building, very dated and dirty. We had been in such a quaint neighborhood, and this was on the edge of that. We wouldn’t have looked at it twice,” says Dr. Williams. But their landlord suggested they look inside. Initially, he had thought about rehabbing the building and leasing it to them, but “in doing our research and homework, we found it would be to our advantage to own the building,” she says. Their landlord had negotiated a purchase contract for himself, but assigned it to the doctors, who were able to find commercial financing through the Small Business Administration. The process took one year: they first saw the building in January 2010, had the contract in March, closed on the building purchase by August and construction started in September. “In hindsight, it seems fast, but it felt like it took forever,” says Dr. Williams, laughing.

The larger space led to other advances in the practice evolution. The lab has expanded from essentially a closet-sized space to a large area where the optician can keep up with demand more easily. And when the partners decided to bring on an associate, Nicole Beedle, OD, in 2009, they were able to expand the practice. “We were not at all thinking about bringing on an associate,” Dr. Giedd recalls. But that was another opportunity that came their way. Dr. Beedle actually approached them, saying she had been so impressed watching their growth. When she introduced herself, she also laid out what she could do to continue that growth, a strategy that included bringing a loyal patient base with her. “We didn’t see that coming at all, but it’s been a win-win,” Dr. Giedd says.

A Partnership Is Formed

Dr. Giedd and Dr. Brighid Williams met in Orlando, a city both came to for different reasons. Dr. Giedd and her OD husband had decided to pursue separate optometric practice opportunities. Her husband has an ownership stake in the practice where he works. “We both came out of school with a lot of debt. We couldn’t have afforded to start a practice together,” she says. That was a smart move, as neither Dr. Giedd nor Dr. Williams drew a salary for the first year or so after the practice opened, as any profits were plowed back into the practice.

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Eola Eyes today bears little resemblance to the abandoned, aging eyesore it was.

to move, they also opted to acquire new equipment. “We have digital refracting lanes,” and the practice is continuing its evolution toward a paperless system. “We’re not fully up with electronic medical records yet,” says Dr. Giedd. Practice staff scans in complete patient charts as those patients return to the office. As a result, an office near the reception area which currently houses paper charts will eventually become a manager’s area.

Different Look, Same Values

Making the change from being in a retrofitted house to an industrial-looking commercial space forced the practice to embrace a new look. The low, long building was constructed in 1962, and it had none of the warmth of a quaint, historic building. “We wanted to bring that warmth, but warm and modern don’t necessarily go together,” Dr. Williams says. So they set out to distinguish the new space in other ways. They kept the exposed brick walls and columns in the interior, but softened it with warm-toned paints, stunning bamboo floors, fabric chairs, lots of lighting and original artwork from local artists. “It took all of us a few weeks to get comfortable,” says Dr. Williams. “But patients saw the same smiling faces,” she says.

The Smart Phase

The change in location came at a point when the doctors themselves, each one in her late 30s, were ready for the next phase of practice. “We’re at a point in our careers where we’re trying to be smart. We love what we do. We have a great staff, a terrific patient base and a beautiful office,” says Dr. Giedd. “But we can’t ride that. It’s not cruise control.”

Now that they have some elbow room, they can accomplish more. Their former office had 1,800 square feet spread over two floors. The new one is an expansive 4,300 square feet. “We had one exam lane in the old house, and now we have three equipped, digital refracting lanes and the potential to have five,” says Dr. Williams. That means the doctors can work at the same time, rather than pass by each other in shifts.

That new schedule has created its own energy. “There are more people in the office, and it’s busier when two or three doctors are seeing patients,” Dr. Williams says. It also allows the two partners to have quick practice management conversations during the day. The doctors have a nice office, which they can use to catch up on paperwork or business management issues when they’re not seeing patients. When one of the doctors wanted to come in on a day off in their previous office, it felt a little crowded. It has also provided the opportunity to have regular staff meetings—because the doctors and staff are together more regularly. Previously, those were held about once a quarter; now they’re scheduled at least once a month.

Each of the partners provides patient care for about 20 hours a week and spends nearly as much time in business management. Dr. Beedle sees patients for about 18 hours a week. Overall, the practice increased its practice care hours by 25 percent, and the added efficiency has boosted revenue even more. By March, they began seeing a jump in revenue and have maintained a 40 percent increase over the prior year.

The two partners have honed their complementary management strategies. “We both have strong personalities, so it’s not like one runs the show. But I couldn’t have done it without her,” says Dr. Giedd. In the beginning, they held a lot of late-night phone conversations, as the two worked alternating schedules in the small office. That schedule also allowed them to work in other places, supplementing their income so practice revenue could be reinvested into the practice, says Dr. Williams. “Starting cold is scary. It’s easier when there are two people who share the risk-taking decisions.”

New Practice Home Gains Recognition

The Eola Eyes practice makeover received the “Seeing Green” award in Vision Monday’s first Design and Retail Excellence (DARE) feature. In fact, the practice was the only one that scored two honors, as it was also nominated for the “We the People” reader’s vote award. The practice was selected for its “most daring eco-achievement,” noting the elements used in construction and daily procedures, such as the use of sustainable bamboo flooring, 100 percent recycled glass-and-concrete countertops, motion sensors that turn off lights in unused rooms, double pane low-e windows, an installed bike rack by the parking lot and recycled shopping bags.

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