Jen Buell is a Knight of the Blind not only as a Lion but also in her chosen profession.

Photo by Jeff Malet/ Western University of Health Sciences
Jennifer (Jen) Buell, 27

President of the WesternU Campus Lions Club of Pomona, California, and a Lion since 2011. In her third year at the College of Optometry, Western University of Health Sciences, Pomona.

My father has been a Lion longer than I’ve been alive. I’ve been exposed to Lions my whole life. You know how Lions clubs try to steal the bell and gavel from club presidents? Well, when I was a kid, I remember going into the refrigerator and being puzzled to find a giant block of JELL-O with a “hammer” in it. Actually, it was the gavel my father had stolen from his president.

As president, I have yet to get through a meeting without losing my gavel (laughs). I’ve had my gavel stolen at every meeting so far by other members. So I have to buy it back.

My parents have always been very big on community service. They’ve been great role models. One of the reasons I went into optometry is to help people in need. I like the Lions because they’re really compatible with my profession. I can relate to the people we serve because they’re very much like the patients I deal with.

Growing up, I always dreamed of wearing a yellow vest like my dad. I think our young club members are starting to get excited about the vests. We might go ahead and order them.

When I was 16, I did the Lions Clubs International Youth Exchange program in Japan for the summer. I also worked one summer in Jalotepac, Mexico, with the Northern California Friends in Sight group. So for me, it’s been not just about serving the underserved, but also exposing youth to cultural experiences, helping them become active members in the community. It plays a big role in my drive to travel and help people.

I had two different host families. They took me traveling all over. I went golfing at Mt. Fuji. That was pretty cool. One host mom owned a sushi restaurant, so I would help there. I also went to several Lions clubs meetings. My host mom helped me write a speech in Japanese for one of them. They also bought me a Yukata, a traditional summer kimono, and took me to the meeting in Ginza, Tokyo. I had to walk through town from the sushi restaurant to the meeting at a hotel. Imagine a white, 5-foot-seven-inch girl walking through a crowded city in traditional Japanese clothing! I was quite the spectacle.

Challenges as president? Getting people involved. We have 68 members, a very good size, but I’d say on average we have maybe 20 people at our meetings. So to get them more involved, we’re slowly setting up committees, and I’m trying to delegate more. Our goal has been to do at least one community service event a month, which we’ve been successful doing. They mostly involve vision screenings. But we’re going to try to do one or two very large health fairs per year and other vision screenings that are interdisciplinary so we can get more members from other medical professions at our school—medicine, dental, podiatry, physical therapy.

Advice for younger Lions? Getting involved early is really important. Not only for the experience and the passion that it gives you for helping other people, but also for networking. We have a lot to learn from our older Lions members.

There’s a lot of wisdom that can be passed down, and if we don’t take advantage of that, then this club could be lost. And I think that would be really sad. With the economy these days, networking is very important. We have older Lions, faculty, and also we work very closely with the Pomona Host Lions Club.

I’m outgoing. And organized. When I was helping organize the club, I was also planning my wedding, finishing my second year in optometry school and volunteering at vision screenings. I’m also very reliable. So I tend to take on too much, because I want to make sure it gets done. I’m a young adult who has a lot of values that are similar to the older population. I try really hard to uphold those values and teach my peers.

I’m also a bit of a perfectionist. It’s frustrating wondering why people aren’t getting more involved. Probably one of my weaknesses, with all the leadership positions I’ve had over the years, is learning how to delegate and let go. Being president has been great for that. I really have to delegate. It’s a great learning experience.