

# Setting the Standard for Service

BY DEBORAH BENJAMIN



Deborah Benjamin

Jessie Merrifield was one of 100 patients receiving free dental care at the OU College of Dentistry's 11<sup>th</sup> annual Kids' Day clinic. The volunteers on Jessie's case were Zane Weaver and Blaire Bowers.

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## Students, faculty and practicing alumni from the OU College of Dentistry are reaching out to communities at home and abroad to share their expertise with those in dire need of dental care.

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he February day was bitingly cold, still the queue of those seeking care would be snaking around the building long before the doors opened.

Even with a 5:30 a.m. arrival at the College of Dentistry building on the OU Health Sciences Center campus, Dr. Kevin Haney had his hands full preparing for Kids' Day, an annual event in which free dental care is provided to underprivileged youth.

Two hours later standing in the college's lecture hall, Haney scanned the crowd of dentistry and dental hygiene students and professionals. He cleared his throat and began a motivational speech to inspire and guide these volunteers and remind them why they had all agreed to such a long, grueling day. He focused on one word that carries a lot of power in the profession: obligation.

Fortunately, at OU's College of Dentistry, it does not take much to encourage students to give back; they are quite aware of their professional obligations, as Haney knows well.

"That room seats about 75 or 80 people, and we had 250 to 260 students actually signed up to help, which is the vast majority of the school. It's an event; it's an amazing event," Haney says. "It was a student in the senior class who approached us in the fall of '97 to do something just for kids. This is our 11<sup>th</sup> year—we've done it every year, and various student groups support it, sponsor it, donate money to it.

"The first year, we saw about 50 kids," Haney says. This year, the dentistry volunteers saw 100 children and provided \$39,000 in dental care during Kids' Day. Over the life of the program, more than 1,000 children have been treated and more than \$400,000 worth of dental treatments and services donated.

For the past seven years, Haney also has coordinated the Special Smiles for Special Olympians program, which



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Randi Hobbs, left, and Janna Pettigrew, College of Dentistry volunteers at Kids' Day, provide needed dental work for Michael Merrifield. More than 1,000 children have been treated over the life of the program.

takes place each year during the Oklahoma Special Olympics State Games. Like Kids' Day, OUCOD gives student and faculty volunteers a chance to provide free screening examinations and oral health instructions to the athletes participating in the games.

**For Kids' Sake** The goal of Kids' Day—and the Special Olympics program—is to minimize dental disease by teaching prevention while treating the immediate needs of the disadvantaged. The sad reality about free clinics is that they may become the only health-care provider for some people, Haney says, noting he often sees repeat patients at annual service events like Kids' Day.

"There's a tremendous need in the community for children's dental services," says Dr. Brian Molloy, a 1999 graduate of the OU College of Dentistry who practices dentistry in Oklahoma City. Molloy was donating his services for the day.

For one young mother, the Kids' Day clinic offered an opportunity to meet her children's needs without delay. Her son and daughter had been diagnosed with seven cavities at their regular dental check-up, but the cost to fill them was prohibitive without dental insurance. By the end of Kids' Day, she was able to get

the necessary care for her children without breaking the bank.

“The point of this program is not only to serve the needs of the patient but also to teach them . . . how to take care of their teeth and to talk to their parents to make sure they understand why there’s an issue,” says Heath Whitfield, a fourth-year dental student.

**Mission Accomplished** Free pediatric clinics are not the only voluntary dental care programs the college offers.

On a Monday evening, the Good Shepherd Ministries in downtown Oklahoma City is packed with adults looking for medical and dental care. Those who seek out care from the free clinic appear thankful for the services rendered, but that does not mean they enjoy undergoing extractions, as demonstrated by the bit of encouragement three students used to get a patient to open her mouth.

“Feel all right there?” asks Heath Evans, a third-year dental student, to the patient.

“We’re dealing with people in pain. I saw two people come in holding their jaw. That’s what we’re dealing with—trying to get people out of pain,” says Frank Lipsinic, Good Shepherd’s dental clinic faculty coordinator.

Good Shepherd Ministries, initiated in 1978 by the First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City, offers an adult dental clinic on Monday nights and children’s dental clinic on Tuesday evenings during the academic year.

Several OU dentistry students and faculty donate their services to what is affectionately known in the college as the “Good Shepherd Mission.” The adult pain and extraction clinic began in 1981 as a medical ministry and moved to its current location on N.W. 12 Street in



Dr. Frank Lipsinic

Good Shepherd Ministries in downtown Oklahoma City offers OU dental students who volunteer there valuable hands-on experience while providing much needed dental care to the disadvantaged.



Dr. Frank Lipsinic

OU students Ryan Whitman, left, and Heath Whitfield don comical masks to lighten the moment for fearful young patients at the Good Shepherd Ministries children’s clinic in Oklahoma City, where the OU dental college has been dispatching volunteer care providers since 2001.



Janna Pettigrew

Despite lack of electricity and access to radiographs, OU dental students and their professional mentors, shown here on a 2006 dental care mission to Cuzco, Peru, treat hundreds of patients during their spring-break trips to lesser developed countries.

Oklahoma City in 1991. The children's clinic opened its doors in January 2002.

About three years ago, the dental/medical ministry gained 501(c)(3) status and is now under the umbrella of the Good Shepherd Ministries of Oklahoma Inc. Lipsinic said the nonprofit status has allowed Good Shepherd to become connected with many community service agencies across the state.

"Originally the materials were donated, and therefore the care environment was 'third worldish.' Back then, it was beg, borrow and steal what you could get," says Lipsinic, who became the dental clinic's faculty coordinator in 1999.

In addition to donated equipment, the clinic received financial support from the Albert F. Staples Society, a College of Dentistry student service organization whose mission, in part, includes providing service to the community. Lipsinic says the Staples Society was instrumental in keeping the clinic afloat during the lean years and ensuring its survival.

These days, grants from the Delta Dental Plan of Oklahoma

Charitable Foundation and the Pierre Fauchard Academy, a dental honorary society, as well as continued donations of equipment have been integral to the Good Shepherd Mission's success. Lipsinic offers another extremely important component: students.

"It all depends on the students," Lipsinic says of the Mission. "If they didn't [volunteer], we wouldn't be here."

Like Kids' Day, the adult and pediatric clinics of Good Shepherd provide students opportunities to hone their skills as future dentists and dental hygienists.

"It's a great experience," says Michael Flint, a third-year dentistry student. "Getting to watch people in the classes ahead of you, you learn a whole lot quicker."

"The students only get so much experience while they're at school, so it really has become an adjunctive teaching facility," Lipsinic says. "It's a big part of their 'professional' education. We feel like part of their training should be teaching them that they have a responsibility to society, and so the community service has been a big thing."

## “We have to give back; it’s an expectation, and it’s really a professional obligation.”



Natives of Cuzco, Peru, line up for the free dental care being offered by visiting students and professionals from the OU College of Dentistry on a mission trip in 2006.

**Learning Abroad** Good Shepherd is the at-home “mission.” But there are also opportunities for students to be medical missionaries abroad.

Nearly every spring break, several dentistry students give up the creature comforts of home to provide dental care to rural communities in third-world countries. The trips are organized through the OUHSC student chapter of Christian Medical and Dental Association. Janna Pettigrew, who graduated in June, has been on two mission trips during her four years in OU’s dentistry college.

“Not everyone is willing to give up their spring break to visit a third-world country,” she says. “You know that there are people out there who don’t have what we have access to. You really learn to appreciate what we have here and all of the opportunities we have.”

Pettigrew, who took part in mission trips to Cuzco, Peru, and HSC’s first trip to Misahualli, Ecuador, says lack of electricity and access to radiographs limited the types of treatments that could be performed, with extractions being one of the primary treatments given to patients.

In Ecuador, eight students from the College of Dentistry traveled in a group of about 55 OUHSC students from all medical areas to Misahualli, a port town located approximately 10 hours from the capital city of Quito. The eight dental students split into three teams, each headed by a dental professional, to provide care to residents of 90 different villages.

“Students get pretty good hands-on experience,” Pettigrew says. “We typically see hundreds of patients.”

The COD students donated services to about 600 patients in Ecuador, with an average of two extractions per patient, according to statistics provided to the alumni magazine *OU Dentistry* by Tom Hough, United Servants Abroad missionary and mission trip organizer.

Working with flashlights and whatever donated equipment and resources they could get their hands on, the dental volunteers clearly had some challenges. However, Pettigrew says the end result was well worth any obstacles she and her peers may have encountered.

“You can tell that the people appreciate it,” Pettigrew says. “You can tell that they’re grate-

ful once it’s done, because most of the time it’s something that is hurting them, and we’re relieving that pain. . . . And I love seeing the kids, because the kids just think we’re awesome!”

**Keeping Their Word** All of these programs lead back to that one word: obligation. There is no doubt that these volunteer opportunities increase students’ access to hands-on experience and education. But, at the end of the day, the hope is that these volunteer efforts will plant an idea in students’ hearts and minds that they will carry into the community once they enter the profession. Giving back seems to be the *modus operandi* of the College of Dentistry, whether it is the Good Shepherd Mission, Kids’ Day, or even the Staples Society’s annual Christmas project for local underprivileged elementary school children and a Big Brothers/Big Sisters Halloween party to provide a fun-filled day for area youth—along with a little dental education.

“We have to give back; it’s an expectation, and it’s really a professional obligation. Students get in the mode of ‘I’ve got to do this, I’ve got exams,’ so somehow we have to, at the same time, engender a philosophy that patients who seek your care are expecting professional service,” Haney says. “They’re expecting you to be objective; they’re expecting you to be knowledgeable—they expect you to give back, to be a role model in the community. So service days let students see that this is what the profession is about.”

*Deborah Benjamin is a writer in the Office of University Development and freelances articles for Sooner Magazine.*