

Guatemala Fall 2010 Dental Journey Report

Dentistry For All volunteers have been providing quality dental care to those who just do not have any chance of receiving it...in several countries, in some of the poorest regions of the world. Places where people live lives of survival daily... where the effect of weather changes doesn't ruin a holiday or make the drive to work a little longer....it determines whether or not they will have food for their families that season. We work in places where families of 10 or more live in rooms the size of some walk-in closets I have seen. Those lucky enough to have electricity don't plug in their curling irons or home computers, they plug in a small light to avoid keeping the fire burning too long, so their children don't have to collect wood all day long. We also work in places where access to power and food sources are not as much a problem, but affording them is. We work in shanty towns near cities, and on mountain-top rural villages. We work where we are needed, but not nearly everywhere that need is. We have been working in the same towns and villages in Guatemala and Nicaragua for over 15 years, and we are not just fixing teeth anymore.

Volunteers of DFA just completed our 35th Dental Journey, and the 20th to Guatemala since 1995. In just one week in working in Comitancillo, with 13 volunteers from Canada, the U.S., and Guatemala, we treated 253 patients and completed 815 procedures. In 15 years, our volunteers have helped over 14,000 people and completed over 35,000 procedures. Truly remarkable for a group started by a guy who went to Guatemala with his daughter, with a box of anesthetic and a handful of forceps, with the intention of doing what he could.... Little did Dennis Bedard know what he was starting...

When we left Guatemala last spring, Dr. Shane Fisher stayed behind to work on opening the Comi Clinic, and initiated several preventative and oral care programs in the local schools. Within 2 months of living in Comitancillo, he had accomplished just that. Our recent volunteer team arrived in Comi and had a chance to work in and around the Comi Clinic (we opened additional clinic space to accommodate our large team), as well as meet with several local teachers who have been involved with the pilot programs developed for the local schools. The response has been so overwhelming, that 4 more schools are being added once the new school year begins next month. DFA hired a local teacher (Edvin Lopez) to develop the program and implement it in some of the village schools, as well as to coordinate patient visits to the clinic during the times we are not there as a large group. Several dentists from Guatemala City have worked in the clinic since its opening (inaugurated by the U.S. Ambassador, who was in Comi for a town visit!), and the long-term plan is for it to be shared between travelling dentists from North America as well as Guatemalan dentists – creating a more sustainable system of dental care for the people of Comi. For the first-timers on the Journey, it was an experience they will not soon forget, one in which the entire team worked very hard to try and treat everyone. For those of us who have worked in Comi before, it was a chance to not have to wait a full year since our last visit to the area. Because of the opening of the Comi Clinic, the people who live in the area do not have to suffer their toothaches for extended periods of time anymore...and we need more volunteers to work both on our annual Volunteer Dental Journeys, as well as in the between times in the Comi Clinic!

There are always so many highlights of our time in Comi, and I'm happy to share them all with you live...but for the purpose of this update, I will share with you the few that really burned into my soul... Both Shane and I had kids who sat in the chair, eagerly at first... and when they opened their mouths, their parents looked at us pleadingly, asking us if their children needed to have all their teeth taken out...these were 4 and 5 year old boys, with every tooth in their mouths virtually destroyed by decay. Several times (in my limited Spanish deciphering abilities) I heard the mom saying to the boys that they had sore teeth because of all the candies they eat – it is good to know that some of our teachings, and that if the teachers of AMMID (the local development group we partner with in Comi) are getting through to the people...in fact, Edwin wrote a story about 'sugar monsters' and found some photos on the internet (thanks to a donated laptop we brought for him to use) of plaque bacteria – stories some of the kids said they would never forget and never again wanted to have those monsters in their mouths! It was brilliant! The message has been coming from us for years – but when it came from one of their own, someone who grew up in Comi and was teaching them in their native language (Mam) the effect was exponential! Needless to say, both boys had extensive treatment done – Shane and I chose the 'worst' half of their mouths to fix, a total of 6 pulpotomies (baby root canals), 8 stainless steel caps, several decay-controlling fillings, a few extractions and cleanings....all in just two kids.

Often people ask us why we travel so far to provide dental care to people in need, when there are plenty closer who are in need as well... my answer is all about access. In Guatemala, there are so few sources of medical and dental care for those living in rural communities, but development has found its way to bring all the refined sugars and soda needed to pretty much wreck a generation of primary (and permanent for that matter) teeth - there is very little knowledge of the destructive capabilities of sweets, and furthermore, often sugary sodas are promoted as safer than the water to drink, and much cheaper than bottled water. It borderlines insanity... a great example of this occurred to one of my last patients of day 3 of work – a 2 year old girl, who's young, bright-enough looking parents brought her in, screaming to the clinic. Not unusual for someone of her age, but when I looked in her mouth I figured out why...every single tooth in her mouth was nearly rotted to the gums... a few looked restorable, but the more urgent treatment needed was the removal of at least 4 abscessed teeth. After a quick assessment and confirmation with the parents, we froze the infected teeth and I had a moment to ask the parents what could have caused the problem – did she drink a lot of sugary liquids or eat candies? Her mom started crying and looked at the dad and he then explained that when their daughter was a baby, she was very sick and needed to be under doctor's care for most of her life so far – she could not eat much, so to put on weight it was suggested they feed her high calorie foods, and most of her medications were made in a sweet mixture so she would take them.... it is hard to believe she can function at all with the teeth she had left, but we were not able to do much more than the work we did – but we did make sure they knew when we were coming back...in just a few short months, and she is already one of the first on the list to be seen by one of our pediatric dentists as soon as we return. A couple of lessons learned here – first impressions – not always fair... my initial thought was similar to the other kids... I had no idea what this child had been through already in her wee short life so far. The second lesson learned – knowledge is power, but even these parents did not know what they were doing when it was suggested what to feed her and how to give her the medications... so it's not always their choice that lead to problems, nor their fault.

Last spring, when we returned from Guatemala after over 5 weeks of work, I shared the story of two boys from the town of Xenocoj, who we saw in our clinics, and their effect on us went beyond simply fixing their teeth. The first, Eddy, a 13 year-old boy who we treated, who had many infections in his teeth and several which needed to be fixed. He was the 'one more' that we have so much difficulty turning away, only on that day, we decided to see 'uno mas' (one more). As a refresher, after extensive work was done we wanted to see him a few days later, so we could check on him – when he returned, he was clearly ill and not healing well, and after he collapsed outside of our clinic, we arranged to have him sent by ambulance and seen by a doctor a few towns away. We then discovered the horror story of his life – Eddy was not in school, but instead working 12-14 hour days because his father was not around – he was supporting his 5 younger siblings and sick mom by gathering wood each day, all day for 'a man who owned a horse', for about \$3.00 a day. He ate a piece of bread for breakfast, broth soup for lunch, and perhaps one corn tortilla for dinner. Always thirsty, he drank from the horse's trough. When he was seen by the doctor, it was discovered he was severely malnourished, immune-compromised, parasite-ridden (from the horses trough), and on a fluke, it was discovered that he had a congenital heart condition which, according to the doctor, would have killed him within a few years at the rate he had been working. Our friends Richard and Susan in Antigua helped us to set Eddy's life straight – several members of DFA have been helping them by purchasing, for the family nutritional foods, he has been seeing the doctor and has QUIT his job, in order to prepare for what he has always wanted to do...go to school.

Eddy's story continues, and last week we arranged to meet with his mother and a few local aid workers who had been keeping track of him since our visit. Many people have asked for an update on Eddy, and I am happy to share some wonderful news.... Eddy has gained a significant amount of weight...healthy weight! He smiles wide, and shows off his missing front teeth (he has the same smile as his mother!) and has not worked since we saw him... he has been through the preliminary testing and is scheduled for the important heart surgery that will save his life. He looks forward to starting school in January, and he is going to be tutored thanks to a fund set up by some very kind friends of ours in Calgary...to prepare him for the first time he has ever been a student. When asked what he is looking forward to most about going to school, he replied "I want to read and write, and I want to sign my name when they bring us food so my mom doesn't have to put her fingerprint on the paper". Eddy's mom has never been able to know how to write her name. Such a small thing, so significant for Eddy and his family.

The second little boy is David, an 8-year old who had a congenitally deformed right ear, which caused him to be deaf on that side. He literally had no ear, and for the length of his short life, he was always made to feel like an outsider because of it.... The two physicians who were with us in that town, Dr Alan Shefrin and Dr Margriet Greidanus, both recognized the nature of the deformity, and knew it was reparable...with the right surgeon. Funds were provided, and once again through our friends in Antigua, he was able to be seen by a doctor, and so far two of the three procedures have been completed, he had a portion of a rib transplanted to his ear to create the shape of a real ear, and in a few weeks he will have the final surgery to form it into a real ear...his mom had said he did not want to go to school because if the way he looked, but he is now about to look like everyone else...and now he can hear from both sides. We told him that when he gets his new ear, we are going to buy him a pair of

sunglasses as he has never been able to wear glasses before! They have already been promised by Dr. Kerry Moscovitz, an optometrist...and my brother-in-law, in Seattle (thanks Kerry)!

So it starts with a committed group of people, wanting to do their part to change lives...Dentistry For All volunteers continue to make a huge difference in the lives of these people. We travel together on our Dental Journeys intent on doing what we do best, fixing teeth and trying to prevent further problems – by educating, by encouraging, and by using our skills to do what we can – the entire group – from those whose hands are at the end of the dental drill, to those who change the oil in our compressors... we are all a part of the same team, essential pieces in the DFA machine that changes lives...and it goes beyond the dentistry. We've become a part of their communities, and unlike other travelling relief organizations who move around from place to place, we're not going anywhere. Comi now feels like home for many of us, and we will no longer only be there once a year – we're there to stay!

I hope to see many of you at the Guate-Gala Saturday, November 13th to help support our Journeys and the Comi Clinic, and invite you to travel with us and experience Comi and the rest of Guatemala and Nicaragua through your own eyes...

Thanks to all,
Brad Krusky, Executive Director,
Dentistry For All
www.dentistryforall.org