

Serving Others by Volunteering Abroad

FELLOW IN ACTION – *By T. Bob Davis, DMD, FICD*

In many ways, one dentist can use the skills and insights gained in dental practice to make a big difference in the world. This influence is available to all of us as dentists and humanitarians.

In 2018 I led two mission trips: my 42nd Annual Spring Break trip in March (and my 7th trip to Guatemala) and a once-in-a-lifetime trip to India in July.



(L-R) Dr. John Ratliff, Dr. T. Bob Davis and Dr. Pan Kaping

Only seven people made the two-week trip to India. We traveled halfway around the globe to a remote part of earth on latitude E90. Coincidentally, my birthplace in the US is on latitude W90. Mentoring is a major byproduct of all my mission trips and can be for yours, too! The two students on the trip at the time are now dentists: Dr. John Ratliff and Dr. Pan Kaping, whose birthplace we served.

During Spring Break 2018 to Guatemala, the team of 60 provided dental care for over 850 patients at the San Raymundo Hospital Compound. The Compound was founded and principally built by a highly respected Dallas EENT physician, Dr. Tim Trone. He saw the need on his first visit to San Raymundo some 25 years ago, and assisted the local community in starting the hospital and a small, fixed dental clinic.

Dr. Kevin Seidler, a prominent Dallas area dentist and former Texas ICD leader, led a volunteer group of medical personnel to the site (with Dr. Trone's advice) and returned for several years with different teams. Hoping to draw upon his experience, I approached Dr. Seidler about my group joining his group. Dr. Steven Sperry, Dr. Drew Nalley (then dental student leaders for my trip) and I went on an exploratory visit in November 2010 and made plans for a spring break joint venture a year and half later.

Soon afterward Dr. Seidler's group, ServingHIM Healthcare International Ministries, began a new project in another city not far away. We have continued our work in the same place due to the need,

safety of the Compound, encouragement of the local leadership, and potential to impact an increasingly larger part of the Guatemala dental community. This shows how dentistry can be included when physicians see the need for a well-rounded healthcare initiative. Dentistry can be a door opener for medical care in a community. Most dental procedures immediately relieve the problem, the patient quickly understands the value, and appreciation is one of the hallmarks of such patients throughout the world.

In Guatemala, at the end of our week, a group of grade-school-age students formed a line, and our team formed another line, for a big hug of their appreciation to our team – reminiscent of sports teams that line up at the end of a game to give each other a high five. This expression of unity and gratitude is one of the great aspects of going to another country to share skills, talents, and resources – although volunteerism can be within our own borders with similar results.

I took my first dental mission trip to Mexico in 1977 on the invitation of Dr. John Bagwell, a Dallas physician who traveled to the Matamoros Children's Home and provided medical care for them once a year. His urgent plea for a dentist to supplement his care was the initiation of these trips over the past 44 years.

I had been doing local volunteer dental care for Buckner Children's Home in Dallas (starting in January 1973) when I "borrowed" Baylor Dental School for a Saturday. With 10 dentists and 50 total team member volunteers we examined 400 children, cleaned their teeth, took x-rays and made a dental record/chart for each, sending them back with a bag of dental goodies. I collated the results and presented a plan to the Buckner Administration that would adequately care for the children on campus.

I was able to donate some of the equipment and get others to complete needed equipment and supplies, to open a clinic on the second floor of what was called the 'old radio building' that once contained an in-house campus radio station. They hired a part-time dentist and hygienist based on that plan. The model lasted as long as children lived on campus. That was after I had spent two years in the Air Force and was into my fourth year of private general dental practice. The message from this: YOU CAN BEGIN VOLUNTEERING LOCALLY EARLY IN YOUR PRACTICE LIFE.

In 1988 I set up a dental clinic on the Happy Hill Farm Academy Children's Home

Campus, with donated equipment and supplies as well as my own. It has been a favorite charity of the world-renowned Dallas Cowboys.

How do YOU begin YOUR project?

Find a Need. Connect with People.

Outline a Plan. Use Existing Blueprints. Draw a Floor Plan. Type up a Draft. Make Notes. Finalize Proposal.

Since 2001, Texas A&M College of Dentistry students have treated patients at an off-campus site. In 1999 I started the process outlined above to accomplish this goal.

Within the Dallas Life Homeless Shelter, I also made plans for an initial dental clinic setup in the late '90s, contributed equipment and supplies, gathered other donations and set the pattern for decades of service in Downtown Dallas, across I-30 from the Dallas Convention Center. Recently an anonymous donor provided a state-of-the-art, three-chair dental clinic suite which will serve the 500 bed homeless shelter's dental needs for years to come.

In 1998, as a pre-dental Texas A&M student, Dr. Brett Murphey joined my mission trips for two years before entering dental school. He was elected president of his University of Texas-Houston School of Dentistry freshman class, and asked me if he could bring some of his friends along with the Baylor Dental School students (who numbered over 50 or more each year). Groups totaling over 100 for several years were the result. Brett continued to join our trips for over 15 years. His example shows what just one student leader can do!

Be sure to have fun on your trips along with the long hours and hard work. We play soccer with the local soccer team one night during our week. This is a great team building exercise.

Dentists have a great opportunity to join the medical and dental communities throughout the world to provide the care they see the need for, but cannot provide themselves. When dental personnel consider going on a mission trip, teaming up with a physician or dentist who is already going is a simple starting point. It is a way to not have to create the wheel, but rather to get on the wagon while the wheels are rolling.

Editor's Note: Dr. T. Bob Davis is the recipient of the 2018 ADA Humanitarian Award. He is one of several ICD USA Section Volunteer Seminar facilitators.