

FDA Dentists: Bringing Smiles to the Struggling

“Our responsibility as dentists is to help those who are struggling.”

— Dr. Thomas D.

By Niki Pocock
ACTING COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER



Dr. James Strawn provides dental care with a holiday flair at a Project Christmas Smile event.

A Jacksonville woman had her tooth broken off at the root when she did not surrender her purse to an attacker. Victim Services offered to cover 66 percent of her dental care, but was unable to suggest a dentist.

The victim then started calling every dentist in the phone book – until she came to Dr. **Heather Alton**, a Florida Dental Association (FDA) member. Dr. Alton provided a dental cleaning, tooth extraction and bridge to fill the empty space.

“In cases like these, the women tend to have low self esteem because of their appearance,” Dr. Alton said. “When their appearance improves, their attitude and whole life improves. I just appreciate the opportunity to give back.”

Dr. Alton is not the only one.

In Vero Beach, another FDA member, Dr. **Richard Huot**, has treated hundreds of children from a local Hibiscus Children’s Foundation branch, the Hibiscus Children’s Village. For the past three years, Dr. Huot has provided free dental exams, cleanings, sealants, fluoride treatments, X-rays and restorative care that would have cost more than \$47,460. His services are available to each child who comes

Bringing Bright Sunshine State

s professional dentists
who are in need. ”

Doan, Fort Pierce

through the safe house, which provides care for abused and neglected children.

“Some of these kids don’t qualify for Medicaid and they just fall through the cracks,” Dr. Huot said. “I looked for a way to help kids who can’t help themselves and found that the private sector was the answer. By working with the Hibiscus Children’s Village, I am able to avoid bureaucracy and paperwork so we can help the kids faster.”

Helping children does not stop in the dental office.

FDA dentist Dr. **Gerald Santiago** of Naples has provided free dental care to approximately 3,000 Florida children over the past 12 years. He also has found a way to mix in a little fun.

“From 1999 to 2003, I had two offshore racing boats named *Zero Cavity*. I would take handicapped and disadvantaged kids out on the water during charity rides, parades and races,” Dr. Santiago said. “I just do a little bit, just a couple days, but if every dentist helped just a little we could help a whole lot of kids.”

Dr. Santiago volunteers at the Florida Department of Health’s Children’s Medical Services Plastic Surgery Clinic once a month. At the clinic, he works with a team including plastic surgeons, orthodontists and social service staff to

Please see SUNSHINE, 27



Dental hygienists brighten smiles at Dr. David Ferlita’s *Give Kids a Smile* event.

“

Project Christmas Smile started 20 years ago as a way to provide dental assistance during the holidays. “We didn’t want anyone to wake up during the holidays with a toothache.”

— Dr. James Strawn, Fort Pierce

”

SUNSHINE from 25

help children with problems such as cleft lips and palates. He also offers free dental services to children with behavioral difficulties every other Friday at the Collier Health Services Inc. Golden Gate Dental Practice.

FDA dentists also recognize the importance of helping out during special times of the year.

Project Christmas Smile Grows Strong

Dr. **James Strawn** of Fort Pierce initiated *Project Christmas Smile* 20 years ago as a way to provide dental assistance during the holidays. The program began in his dental office and invited patients-in-need from any denomination to receive care.

“We didn’t want anyone to wake up during the holidays with a toothache,” Dr. Strawn said. “The first year, we had 70 patients lined up through the parking lot and we stayed in the office until we treated each one. It was great, but I knew I needed help.”

Once Dr. Strawn got the word out to his dental colleagues, the program took on a life of its own. Within the next few years, the program grew to include six offices, but they still needed help. Indian River Community College assisted the program a lot when it became involved, but again, the program was still growing – and branching out.

Dr. **Thomas Doan** worked with Dr. Strawn in Fort Pierce, but began coordinating the effort in his own office when he moved to Sarasota. Dr. Doan’s local program now has 20 volunteer dentists and serves 140 patients every year – all in one day.

“Sarasota is a very nice area, but there are always underserved communities in any beautiful place,” Dr. Doan said. “Our responsibility as professional dentists is to help those who are in need.”

Project: Dentists Care at the Heart of it All

In the early 1990s, Dr. **Frank Boyar** of Delray Beach realized there were several access-to-dental care events going on throughout Florida, but there was not a statewide organized effort. With the inspiration and help of Dr. **Phil Crawford** of Boca Raton, Dr. Boyar started *Project: Dentists Care* (PDC), a statewide FDA effort to recruit, publicize and organize dental charity events.

“We put all the projects under one umbrella, allowing dentists to create their own initiative, but offering assistance at a statewide level,” Dr. Boyar said. “Children should not die from a toothache,” he said, referring to a 12-year-old Maryland boy who died after bacteria from an infected tooth spread to his brain. “PDC allows Florida dentists to prevent these kinds of tragedies.”

Last year, for the first time, *Project Christmas Smile* was included in the PDC umbrella as it expanded to Florida’s entire Treasure Coast. Coordinated by Dr. **Reza Ardalan** in Port St. Lucie, the effort included 21 dentists, 18 hygienists and 41 dental assistants. Local practitioners put forth more than

Please see SUNSHINE, 29



Dr. Thomas Doan (far right) and participating dentists flash their smiles at his 2005 *Project Christmas Smile* event.



Dr. Gerald Santiago gave kids a smile by taking them out on his two offshore racing boats named Zero Cavity.

SUNSHINE from 27

120 hours of volunteer time, treated more than 200 patients and performed almost \$50,000 worth of pro-bono work.

“*Project Christmas Smile* has continued to develop every year, and the next logical step was to make it a PDC program,” Dr. Ardalan said. “Ideally, the event would span statewide and grow as big as *Give Kids a Smile* (GKAS).”

Give Kids A Smile Focuses on Youngsters

Every year, during Children’s Dental Health Month in February, PDC organizes GKAS. The statewide effort provides another opportunity for dentists to give back. In 2007, 40 events took place around Florida that provided everything from dental cleanings to root canals for disadvantaged children. Almost 1,500 dental staff provided more than 5,000 kids with more than \$1 million worth of free dental care.

“Our goal is to have at least one GKAS event in each of Florida’s 67 counties,” PDC President Dr. **David Ferlita** of West Palm Beach said. “We had 30 counties participate in 2007, but if we can expand the number of programs around the state, then we expand the number of patients we can provide with both restorative and preventive care.”

Restorative care is essential once dental problems develop, but it is best to address oral health proactively.

Dr. **Ervin Cerveny**, dental director at the Ruskin Suncoast Community Health Center, knows how important

preventative treatment is. Recently, Dr. Cerveny worked with Dr. **Marlayne Newman** to participate in the center’s back-to-school fair that provided free dental exams to more than 90 children so they could enroll for school. Since oral health and overall health are connected, the students were also able to receive required physicals from medical students.

“The Suncoast Community Health Center’s mission is to be a safety net that provides care to underprivileged populations,” Dr. Cerveny said. “By providing oral screenings, dental supplies and educational materials, we establish healthy oral health habits from a young age.”

However, Dr. Cerveny knows dental care should start long before children begin school. The health center also provides dental cleanings for soon-to-be mothers. The efforts include coordinating with patients’ obstetricians for prenatal dental care, then working with pediatricians to incorporate oral fluoride treatments during the child’s six-month check-up. All patients are encouraged to continue their dental health efforts at home through educational materials and instructions.

“Prevention is key and education is required,” he said regarding oral health care. “By starting at a very young age, we are able to provide education that prevents oral ailments such as baby bottle tooth decay.”

For more information about dental health and access-to-care programs throughout Florida, visit www.floridadental.org. ■■■