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Dental Volunteers for "Give Kids a Smile"

photo provided by Give Kids a Smile

Giving a Smile to Those in Need

By Wendy Crooks

SOME RESEARCHERS HAVE CLAIMED that it takes 43 muscles to frown and only 17 to smile. Of course, the premise of this information is to point out that it takes less effort to smile than it does to frown. Now, thanks to some in the dental profession, more of our children have even more to smile about!

In 2002, the Greater St. Louis Dental Society began the "Give Kids a Smile" program where a group of dentists volunteered their time and set up a temporary full-service clinic that treated nearly 400 "in need" children over two days. The program has grown nationwide with over 500,000 children benefiting from the services and nearly 11,000 dentists participating last year.

According to Frisco orthodontist John Wise, the Give Kids a Smile program was initiated locally last year. The 4th District Dental Society of the Texas Dental Association got the ball rolling in this area. School nurses from Allen, Frisco and McKinney pre-selected children considered more at

risk or in need of the free dental care prior to the event. The first year the program was a great success as 150 children were treated. This year that success grew and nearly 200 children benefited from the three-day event with a whopping \$113,000 worth of dental work donated. Patterson Dental Supply Company donated most of the supplies. Surprisingly, a toothbrush and toothpaste are not covered by foodstamps yet; dental illnesses are the second leading cause of school absences. In fact, The Oral Health Report of the Surgeon General states that over 51 million school hours are lost each year due to dental related illnesses.

The Give Kids a Smile program takes place annually to kick off National Dental Health Month. Hundreds of local people volunteer their time in order to pull the three-day event together. Approximately 50 doctors participate working mostly three to four-hour shifts. Other volunteers include high school students as well as students,

graduates and staff from the Collin County Community College District's (CCCCD) dental hygiene program.

Joanne C. Fletcher, director of the dental hygiene program at CCCCCD, explained that the program benefits more than just the patients. She said that it was a "wonderful service learning activity for our students. It was good for the students to see the professionals sharing their time and talents for the good of community children."

She explained that

it was rewarding for them to see all of those happy faces and to know that they can help now and when they go out into the community after graduation and make a difference.

"Dental illnesses are the second leading cause of school absences."

The students and doctors performed such services as applying sealants and fluoride varnishes, taking x-rays and cleanings. The dental hygiene students also ensure all of the instruments are sterilized for the doctors. Ms. Fletcher added that the most important job that the students did was provide general dental hygiene instruction to both the kids and their parents.

This totally volunteer-driven program has benefited both the givers and the recipients and certainly made it easier for all who were involved to put on a smile.

Wendy Crooks is a freelance writer living in Plano.