FREE R.I. DENTAL CLINIC RESTORES SMILES — AND LIVES

By Nick Gilbert
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Some pitched tents the night before. Others started lining up in the middle of the night for the chance to get much-needed dental care. Most had not seen a dentist for years, not even for a routine cleaning. Many had decayed or missing teeth and were in constant pain, some for more than a year. Dental care was not a priority — putting food on the table was.

On the weekend of May 31 to June 1, the Community College of Rhode Island's Lincoln Campus hosted the third annual Mission of Mercy free dental clinic. More than 360 dental and medical professionals and 225 community volunteers donated their time and talent to treat 900 patients badly in need of dental care.

Care was first-come, first-serve, and patients were triaged according to their oral health needs. Most patients were adults, though pediatric dentists were on site to treat the few children in attendance.

During the clinic, 3,845 dental procedures were performed, including routine cleanings, fillings, extractions, root canals and fitting partial dentures. The value of donated services was estimated at $527,738.

In addition to free dental care, patients were screened for high blood pressure, tuberculosis, HIV and hepatitis C. They were also offered Tdap (tetanus, diphtheria and pertussis) and pneumonia shots.

Lisa Ferreira, 45, of Tiverton was in constant pain — all day, every day. She said nothing helped.

The pain just kept getting worse. All day long she put medicine on her gums, took over-the-counter painkillers and prayed for relief. Dental decay had destroyed her two front teeth.

Ferreira withdrew from life, not wanting people to see her with missing teeth. She never smiled for family pictures, and she worked at a telephone answering service where no one would see her; not as a personal trainer, which was her dream. "Who is going to hire a personal trainer who has no teeth?" she asked.

But Ferreira was in luck. Her sister, Tracy Dame of Lincoln, had been a volunteer at the Mission of Mercy dental clinic in 2013, so she knew how to get the care that her sister so badly needed but could not afford.

The two sisters arrived at the clinic at 4:30 in the morning. Even then, the line of patients snaked around the building, all waiting and hoping that a dentist would see them.

Ferreira was scared. A prior dental procedure had been painful, and she worried that the dentist would not "numb" her mouth and that she would feel pain.

After hours of waiting, Ferreira saw a dentist, who told her that she needed to have what was left of her front teeth pulled out. "He said that he would take out the teeth and make a partial plate, so that I would have front teeth," said Ferreira. "The next morning I got my new front teeth, and when I looked in the mirror, I burst out crying," she said.

Jeffrey Dodge, DMD, who has practiced general dentistry in Woonsocket since 1987, has long been concerned about poor access to dental care. So in 2011, he volunteered his time and dental skills at a Mission of Mercy dental clinic in Connecticut, where he successfully treated patients with serious dental disease.

It was such a rewarding experience that Dodge spearheaded the effort to organize a Mission of Mercy dental clinic in Rhode Island.

"Everyone has the right to look normal and be able to smile with two front teeth, and to live without dental pain," he said. The average length of time that patients suffer with dental pain is 281 days per year.

At first, Dodge found that there was not a lot of local interest in establishing a dental clinic in the state. There were organizational obstacles to overcome, such as expenses, personnel, location and equipment. Undaunted, Dodge founded the Rhode Island Oral Health Foundation, a nonprofit charity that helps defray Mission of Mercy program costs. Dodge serves as the foundation's president.

Rhode Island's first Mission of Mercy dental clinic was held at CCRI in June 2012. More than 800 patients were treated during the two-day event.

CCRI's Lincoln campus proved to be the perfect spot for the dental clinic.

The college offers a dental hygiene training program and has state-of-the-art dental equipment. And its campus can be set up to accommodate many patients and volunteers

Cathy Gazzola, dental hygiene program director at CCRI, has served as the site coordinator for the Mission of Mercy clinic for the last three years.

"It makes a big difference to have dental chairs, instruments, and X-ray already on site — and the ability to sterilize equipment and maintain a high level of infection control," Gazzola said.

Although the Mission of Mercy clinic is held once a year, access to dental care for uninsured and underinsured Rhode Islanders is available through other organizations, such as Donated Dental Services-Rhode Island, an arm of the Rhode Island Dental Associations, and Dental Lifeline Network, a national organization. Now in its 25th year, over more than 360 dentist volunteers and 64 dental laboratories have donated treatment in private Rhode Island dental offices for 28,000 patients through Dental Lifeline Network.

Martin Nager, DMD, of Warwick is the organization's president.

Participating dentists take one patient a year, though specialists, such as oral surgeons, take more. The average number of patients treated is 130 per year. Patients have to qualify for the program, and there is a three-month waiting list. Details about eligibility for the program and an application are available on the organization's website at dentallifeline.org/rhode island.

Additionally, Thundermist Health Centers offer dental care at all three of their locations: Woonsocket, West Warwick and Wakefield. Dental care is also offered through their Community Dental Program. Dentists and hygienists provide a full range of comprehensive dental services to both children and adults. Uninsured patients are charged on a sliding-scale basis. Thundermist's website is thundermisthealth.org.

When Maria Osorio, of Pawtucket, came to this country from Colombia, she had not seen a dentist in 21 years. Every time she brushed her teeth, her gums bled heavily and her teeth were badly decayed and about to fall out.

She never left her house, because she was afraid of what people would think of her bleeding gums and bad breath. Her daughter, Juliana Zapata, took her to the Mission of Mercy dental clinic. They arrived at 4 in the morning and waited for a long time. Osorio was afraid that they would have to pull out all of her teeth.

"They did a lot of work on my mother's gums, a very deep cleaning and saved all of her teeth," Zapata said. "She was so happy that she cried."

Today her mother's gums are healed, and she is no longer afraid to brush her teeth or go outside — and she can smile a big smile, showing everyone her beautiful teeth.

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