

Free to Smile Foundation helps cleft lip and palate patients across the world

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Staff Writer

Whether it is in private dental offices, hometown clinics or abroad, Ohio Dental Association members are always finding new ways to give back to those in need of care.

The Free to Smile Foundation, formed in 2008 by ODA member Dr. Byron Henry, is a nonprofit corporation to benefit children with cleft lip and palate deformities who live in underserved regions. These children often endure social stigma, speech impediments and nutritional challenges.

“The foundation is a grassroots movement from Columbus, Ohio, to help make a real change in the world,” Henry said. “It is a chance for the dental community and the greater community to reach out and help many families in other areas of the world suffering from this terrible facial deformity.”

The mission of the 501(c)(3) humanitarian organization is to support and sustain comprehensive, quality surgical and dental services to poor and underprivileged children and adolescents throughout the world.

“It is so important for us to see beyond ourselves and the great lives that we have and lend some of our great fortune to those who do not have the same opportunities,” he said. “These kids are such great kids; they have simply been dealt a different deck of cards.”

The Free to Smile Foundation supports a team of doctors and volunteers to travel to Guatemala, Cambodia and Columbia annually to perform free surgical and dental care and provide education.

Each 10- to 14-day trip has a team of 5-6 dentists to treat a total of 40-90 children. Dentists and volunteers pay their own airfare and bring their own supplies. They partner with local hospitals and other foundations, training the local surgeons to perform these procedures, and donate supplies.

The foundation has four goals supporting its mission:

- To continue to raise awareness of the great need of impoverished children with cleft lip/palate deformities.
- To visit each mission site once a year to treat patients and educate local surgeons.
- To recruit surgeons and dentists who share their commitment and want to join their mission trips.
- To achieve sustainability for the foundation through continual fundraising efforts.

The next trip will be to Cambodia this September, and the group will travel to Guatemala in January of 2010. The foundation also plans to send 40 boxes of supplies, costing nearly \$2,500 in shipping alone, to Guatemala. The trip itself is expected to cost a total of \$20,000.

The idea for the foundation came from Henry's travels performing cleft lip and palate surgeries overseas, which he began almost 10 years ago. Henry, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon who practices at Northwest Oral and Facial Surgery in Worthington, Hilliard and Marysville, Ohio, initially performed extractions and dental work overseas. He started doing cleft lip and palate work abroad about seven years ago.

Since then he began doing two to three overseas trips a year on humanitarian missions to provide free cleft lip, palate and dental surgery to impoverished children and adolescents.

"After traveling and performing cleft lip and palate surgeries in these parts of the world, you see the great need over and over and feel like you need to do more," he said.

Two experiences impacted Henry heavily into deciding he needed to do more. The first was on a trip to Cambodia while treating a 15-year-old Cambodian boy with a unilateral cleft lip deformity.

"For the first 15 years of this boy's life, he had been dealing with ridicule, reject and cruelty from other children, all due to a defect that he just happened to have at birth," Henry said. "His father told me the story of all the other children not wanting to play with his son because they feared that he was evil and ridden with evil spirits that may be passed on to them if they touched him."

Henry said the boy would cry for hours because other children wouldn't play with him.

"His father had tried for years to get this deformity corrected, yet he never found a volunteer surgeon to perform the corrective cleft surgery or he never had enough money to have any of the capable local surgeons perform the surgery," he said. "Finally, Angkor Hospital for Children in Cambodia found him and let him know of my coming to the hospital to perform corrective cleft surgery."

When Henry met this young boy and his father, they had traveled for two days by bus and foot to have the cleft lip repaired.

"After repairing the lip, the father cried in a way I had never seen a grown man cry," he said. "He hugged me and told me something in the native language that I did not understand. Yet, I did not need to understand because I knew the universal language and expression of gratitude and deep thanks."

The second experience that impacted Henry was while treating an eight-year-old girl born with a unilateral cleft lip in a rural village in Mali, Africa, almost a year ago.

"The one thing I noticed while in the pre-surgery room was that this little girl would not look at my face," Henry said. "She never made eye contact with me prior to the surgery. Even when I examined the lip defect before the surgery, she turned her eyes downwards."

The girl's mother told Henry that her daughter had the rare opportunity to attend a local rural school for kindergarten when she was five.

"The children at school were sticking their fingers through this little girl's cleft defect," he said.

It was such a disruption the girl was quickly asked to leave the school.

"So here was a little girl who had no control over the destiny of her cleft lip deformity, yet she was unable to obtain an education, unable to make friends and essentially ostracized from her community and life as a young playful child all due to her terrible deformity," he said. "Her mother said she just sat in the house and looked out the window most days."

Henry said after the 90-minute surgery, the girl's demeanor was drastically different.

"This little girl looked in the mirror that one of the nurses held to her face and she got one of the biggest grins I had witnessed in a long time," he said. "She then looked me in the eyes and gave me a hug. I will admit that it brought true tears to me as well."

Henry said thinking of children he had operated on helped him realize how fortunate he is.

"It motivated me and gave me real and true drive to really want to do more, or as much as I can to help the plight of so many of these forgotten cleft children living in the impoverished countries throughout the world," he said.

He and his wife, Stacy Henry, decided to form the Free to Smile Foundation to recruit oral surgeons, raise awareness and help those in need. Also, he said when he shared these experiences following trips many people asked how they could help.

Henry said, while the foundation allows him to pursue his passion, it also allows him to use his talents to help those truly in need.

"It has been a huge commitment, yet every second of time and energy spent is all the more worth the effort," he said.

In addition to Henry and his wife, ODA member dentist Dr. Jason Culley is also on the foundation board. Other board members include Bill Klausman, an attorney at Wiles, Boyle, Burkholder & Bringardner Co., and Dr. Tyler Smith, an orthopedic surgeon who is currently pursuing a postgraduate spine fellowship at Stanford University.

The foundation already has over 100 donors; however, more support is needed for the foundation to grow. The foundation invites dentists to get involved in a number of ways, including:

- Volunteering to help with the organizational aspects of the foundation

- Spreading the word to friends and colleagues
- Becoming a corporate sponsor
- Hosting a fundraiser
- Donating items on the wish list found on the foundation's Web site at <http://www.freetosmile.org>
- Making a tax deductible contribution to Free to Smile Foundation, Attn: CWK, 300 Spruce Street, Floor 1, Columbus, Ohio 43215

“We need to realize our good fortune as dentists living in America and hopefully we can share a little slice of the life that we lead to these many children who suffer so much in a tough life,” Henry said. “The ability to use our resources and finances to help reach across the world and lend this new life to others is a very powerful thing.”

For more information about the Free to Smile Foundation, email info@freetosmile.org, call (614) 778-4344 or visit <http://www.freetosmile.org>.