



CROSSING BORDERS IN SERVICE

ALUMNI PROVIDING DENTAL CARE — AND HOPE — TO YOUNG AND OLD IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

IN THE MIDST OF AN ICY North Carolina winter, Dr. Francis G. Serio (D '80) was already thinking ahead to 10 days in July, when he will return to the Dominican Republic for the 34th summer to spend a week providing dental care to “Los Olvidados” — the forgotten ones, he says — the island poor who have almost no access to dental care, except when Dr. Serio arrives.

Since his first trip in 1982, Dr. Serio estimates the annual Dominican Dental Mission Project, funded with private donations, has served more than 60,000 residents and provided more than \$15 million in dental care over 33 years.

But it's not just about dental care, says Dr. Serio, currently a dentist serving mostly low-income patients at David Bernstein Community Health Center in Greenville, N.C. The group also provides hope, he says, “and people can get from today to tomorrow if they're hopeful.”

In recognition of his commitment to providing care for those in need, Dr. Serio will receive the 2015 American Dental Association (ADA) Humanitarian Award, given annually to dentists who have dedicated extraordinary time and professional skills to improve the oral health of underserved populations in the U.S. and abroad. He will be honored during ADA's 2015 annual meeting, November 5-10 in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Serio is one of many Penn Dental Medicine alumni who provide dental care for the needy, and coincidentally, the service path of a fellow class of 1980 colleague — Dr. Pamela Alberto (D'80) — would also lead to the Dominican Republic. Dr. Alberto heads a dental mission to another part of the Dominican Republic each summer, where she treats children with teeth rotted from chewing sugar cane and adults who have never seen a dentist.



Perhaps not surprisingly, the notion of serving others runs deep at Penn Dental Medicine, where being engaged in the community and helping to make it a better place is a key part of its mission and educational goals.

Through a variety of outreach and service-learning programs, Penn Dental Medicine students provide oral health services to community members, while also broadening their understanding of and experience in public health issues. Since 2001, service learning has been a required part of the Penn Dental Medicine curriculum, and presently, students must complete at least 82 hours of service activities, while students in the community health honors program spend 120 hours helping to staff and coordinate educational and dental care programs with community partners.

TOP: Dr. Pamela Alberto (D'80, front row, second from right) with her team of students and volunteers at Cheerful Heart Dental Mission in the Dominican Republic.

LOWER: Dr. Francis Serio (D'80, second from left) with some of the volunteers on one of his annual Dominican Dental Mission Project trips. This summer will be his 34th service trip to the Dominican Republic.

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DR. FRANCIS G. SERIO, D’80



A COMMITMENT TO SERVICE

In all, Penn Dental Medicine students contribute almost 14,000 service hours annually through both required and elective community experiences and the community service honors program. These programs increase community access to oral health care and provide students and faculty with opportunities to work with such community partners as the School District of Philadelphia, Sayre Health Center, and Philadelphia FIGHT.

“Participating in community activities allows dental students to understand the life experiences of a wider range of patients,” notes Dr. Joan Gluch, Interim Division Chief of Community Oral Health at Penn Dental

ABOVE: Dr. Serio with some of his young patients and with his wife, Dr. Cheryl Serio, also a dentist, who has participated in many of the service trips to the Dominican Republic as well.

OPPOSITE: Dr. Alberto (top, left) with some members of her team of students providing care. This spring was the fifth year the Cheerful Heart Dental Mission returned to the Dominican Republic.



Medicine. “While gaining clinical experiences, students also gain sensitivity to their patients’ needs and the impact of social and cultural factors on health, which prepares students to complete volunteer missions both locally and globally.”

Although community service was not a curricular requirement when Dr. Serio was a student, Penn Dental Medicine contributed to his ability to give back to the community by providing “great dental training,” says Dr. Serio, the son of a dentist and a “very spiritual” mother. “I felt comfortable and confident I could manage the clinical challenges I would face.”

Dr. Serio put those skills to use quickly. Two years out of Penn Dental Medicine, after his first year on the faculty at the University of Maryland School of Dentistry, he had a free month and made his first trip to the Dominican Republic. That summer, he was connected through the Catholic Medical Mission Board to a group of nuns in San Jose de Ocoa, primarily because they were bilingual and he didn’t speak Spanish, and realized they had the capacity to accept larger groups of volunteers.

That launched his annual mission to the impoverished country, which each summer includes dentists, dental students, and others to help with administration. Over the years, his wife, dentist Dr. Cheryl Serio, Director of Advanced Education in General Dentistry at East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine; his son, Andrew; and his daughter,

Grace, now in medical school; have participated in the trip. Dr. Serio spent most of his career in academic dentistry, and has had many students volunteer for the mission over the years.

Once in the Dominican Republic, the group travels to a different town each day, doing fillings, extractions, partial and full dentures, and treating children. That first month in 1982, he treated a few hundred patients. Now, with two teams going to two locations, the mission saw as many as 1,300 patients last summer.

BASEBALLS AND TOOTHBRUSHES

Baseballs and toothbrushes — at first, these two things don’t seem to go together. But when poor children who almost never see dentists need to be coaxed into a treatment chair, Dr. Serio has found that a brand new baseball can be a powerful lure. “In that part of the Dominican Republic, they don’t see new baseballs too often,” Dr. Serio says of the wildly popular sport there.

In addition to treating patients, Dr. Serio is proud that the mission has helped eight Dominicans go to dental school, some of whom helped hold flashlights for mission dentists when they were young. Many of these dentists now provide care for Dominican communities throughout the year, making Dr. Serio’s efforts more sustainable and lasting. “It was one of the best things we did,” he says.

He is also gratified that many who have volunteered with the mission in the past have continued to serve needy populations, sometimes starting dental missions of their own to places in Central America and Cambodia. “We show them they can do it,” he says.

For his volunteer efforts, Dr. Serio has also received the President’s Volunteer Action Award in 1991 from President George H. W. Bush and the Daily Points of Light Award in 2001 from President George W. Bush.

“You have to be open to the spirit, where the unseen hand guides you,” says Dr. Serio. “I have loved being a dentist. I have made great friends from this project, some of whom I only see in the Dominican Republic every year. I see Dominican friends and I see American friends. We work hard and have a great time.”

NOT YOUR TYPICAL PLEASURE TRIP

Further up the eastern seaboard on a snowy March morning, Dr. Alberto was veering her four-wheel vehicle to Rutgers School of Dental Medicine, where she is Clinical Associate Professor in the Department of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery, and discussing plans for her trip to the Dominican Republic just three days later.

Although the warmth of the Caribbean sun has its appeal at the tail end of a frigid winter, this would be no pleasure trip, although the rewards certainly would be plentiful. On March 8, Dr. Alberto and 19 others, including dental students, a nursing professor and nursing students, a physician, an engineer, and support staff would be flying into Santiago, renting four large passenger vans, loading up on food and supplies, and driving five hours to provide dental care in one of the poorest areas of the world.

Up in the hills that border the Dominican Republic and Haiti, where people live in towns with no electricity, running water, and very little food, Dr. Alberto and the group from Cheerful Heart Dental Mission would treat hundreds of adults and children in need of dental care during the one-week trip.

This is the fifth year the mission is returning to the region. Last year, Dr. Alberto and her colleagues treated 460 people, including 300 children, and performed 1,600 procedures, including extractions, restorations and root canals. They triage the most acute problems first, but also managed to seal 750 young teeth and provide fluoride treatments.

While in the Dominican Republic, Dr. Alberto also offers continuing education learning opportunities for local dentists and health care professionals who work with Dominican patients year-round. On the most recent trip, she lectured on advanced local anesthesia techniques.

Dr. Alberto says each mission costs about \$25,000 and the group provided the equivalent of \$165,000 in dental care last year.

To do all this, they need to lug everything they need to this remote location: each person on the mission takes two trunks of equipment

as their baggage, so they can set up chairs, equipment, lights, and everything else needed to treat as many as possible in the short period of time.

Although based on the Dominican side of the border, the mission gets permission to go into Haiti and bring about 100 patients most in need of care to the clinic. Although some young children are frightened to go, Dr. Alberto says the promise of a meal overcomes their anxiety: "These little kids are lucky to get one meal a day, so they'll get on the van with no parent because they'll get food."

"When I first went on this mission, I thought, this is why I became an oral surgeon, to help people. It's changed my life."

DR. PAMELA ALBERTO, D'80

Dr. Alberto, who also has a private practice in Sparta, N.J., says the opportunity she had at Penn Dental Medicine, which led her to oral surgery at a time when it was not a typical path for a woman, is key to her serving those in need.

"I got a great education at Penn, and even though community service wasn't required, we took care of a lot of kids in local schools who were needy," she says. "When I first went on this mission, I thought, this is why I became an oral surgeon, to help people. It's changed my life."

Seven years ago, Dr. Alberto helped lay the groundwork for the mission, which is funded by benefactors John and Carol Cornwell. Once it was established, Dr. Alberto's dental students expressed interest in participating, and it is now offered as an externship that takes place each year during the spring break. Dr. Alberto is also exploring the possibility with Penn Dental Medicine of adding this as an externship site option for Penn Dental Medicine students.

"This kind of experience for dental students is invaluable," she says. "They learn to

triage, deal with challenging problems, they develop speed. When they return to school, they're more skilled."

Students are so moved by their experience that many, including two graduates who are returning with the mission this year, want to continue to serve the community. But for those on the Cheerful Heart Dental Mission, the rewards of helping those most in need are tempered by the abject poverty they see all around.

"There's so much need and so few of us," Dr. Alberto says. "For me and everyone who goes there, you get this conviction of your heart that you have to come back, you feel like you haven't done enough and have to do more."

SHARE YOUR SERVICE ACTIVITIES

Share news of your service/volunteers activities with the *Penn Dental Medicine Journal* at www.dental.upenn.edu/classnotes or alumnifedback@dental.upenn.edu. ■

—By Debbie Goldberg

