



MISSION ACCOMPLISHED!

2015 Jamaica Dental Outreach Project: Ontario dentists, hygienists, and dental students volunteer in Jamaica

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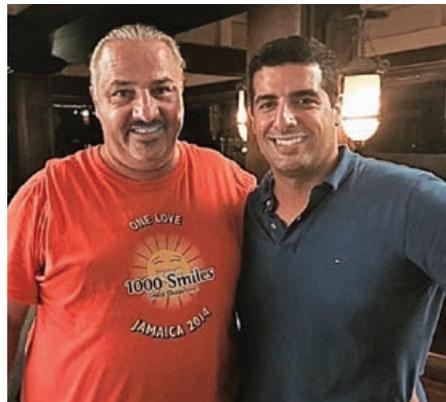
Papa Joe

Serendipity. That's how I would describe the evening of September 4, 2014. It happened to be my birthday. I was sitting at a bar with Dr. Christina Bodea (Elmvale, Ontario) and her husband Stefan Atalick at the Beaches Resort in Negril, Jamaica. I wanted to show them my best card trick. I needed a volunteer.

The bartender hollered out to a burly American with a ponytail sporting a bright orange t-shirt. His name was Joseph Wright, but everyone called him "Papa Joe". I quickly gathered that Papa Joe spends a lot of time in Jamaica. He has the amazing ability to turn on and off a thick Jamaican accent and speak the local dialect (Patois).



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I finished my card trick and asked Papa Joe what he did. He explained that he runs a U.S. charity called Great Shape! Inc. Through their "1,000 Smiles" program, they bring close to 400 dentists, dental students, hygienists, and assistant volunteers down to Jamaica each year to provide free oral health care and education to local Jamaican families. That got my attention.

But what was he doing at the Beaches all-inclusive luxury resort? With a big smile, he explained that the Sandals Foundation generously donates USD\$1-million worth of all-inclusive accommodations (including meals, drinks, entertainment and hotel amenities) for their volunteers each year. In fact, they've been doing so for over a decade.





My jaw dropped. Ever since I heard Dr. Tim Milligan (Toronto, Ontario) talk about doing his volunteer experience with his daughter, Dr. Melissa Milligan, in Guatemala (during his acceptance speech at the 2014 Awards of Distinction at the U of T Faculty of Dentistry Gala), I had wanted to do something similar. Specifically, I wanted to make a physiological improvement on the lives of others – something the practice of law doesn't typically offer. I figured, however, that I could help organize an annual trip somewhere for dentists to travel to and volunteer. For months after hearing Dr. Tim Milligan's speech, I would research dental mission trips online. Nothing seemed to be a proper fit. Then, on my birthday when Papa Joe suddenly told me about their Jamaica dental outreach program, it was a no-brainer. Like I said: serendipity.

Mobilize

Upon returning to Canada, David Mayzel (my law partner) and I moved quickly to organize a dental outreach trip through Great Shape! Inc. and the Sandals Foundation to return to Negril, Jamaica the following year (the summer of 2015). We spoke about the initiative everywhere we went and to anyone who would listen – including Ontario dentists, hygienists, dental students, and dental suppliers. We reached out to Ontario's two dental schools (U of T and Western) about formalizing a joint program for some of their 3rd and 4th year dental students. We even threw a pre-launch social function after the Ontario Dental Asso-

ciation's Annual Spring Meeting and took a picture of some of the volunteers (pg. 24).

We were able to procure \$15,000 worth of sundry donations from Henry Schein, Patterson Dental and K-Dental. And the *Globe and Mail* published an article about our upcoming trip.¹

We asked the volunteers what made them decide to participate. Dr. Ayla Goral Cintosun (Toronto, Ontario) put it best, "It was time to help others. Plus, we need mission trips to appreciate how blessed we are to live in Canada."

Heading Down

After a year of planning, promoting and procuring volunteers and supplies, we were finally heading down. Our group of anxious dentists, hygienists, dental students and support staff (most of whom had never met each other) assembled at the Toronto airport on Friday, August 28, 2015 for the start of our 10-day adventure.

We spent the first few days in Jamaica settling in, enjoying the all-inclusive experience of the Beaches Resort, and receiving orientation from Papa Joe and his team about the hard work that lay ahead of us. We then headed out to the beach to take a full group shot.

We divided ourselves into three groups – one for each of the three clinical locations we would be working out of. My group was called "Triple P". We would be working out of the Grange Hill Community Centre – way out in the sugar cane fields (about 25 minutes away from the resort). We were excited to get started.

Then come Monday morning...

Opposite page (left):
"Papa Joe" (Joseph Wright) and Michael Carabash. (photo courtesy of Michael Carabash)

Opposite page (right):
Top (left to right): Michael Carabash, Peter Chudak, Dr. Ayla Goral Cintosun, Verna Kurtarcan, Matt Bladowski, and Ljubica Durlovska. Bottom (left to right): Parastou Carabash, Dr. Christina Bodea, Dr. Nohora Martinez, Dr. Samantha Amaro, Karen Ergus, Stefan Atalick. (photo courtesy of Michael Carabash)

This page (left):
A patient receiving a Toothfairy Box from Dr. Christina Bodea. (photo courtesy of Dr. Christina Bodea)

This page (centre):
Team shot. (photo courtesy of Michael Carabash).

This page (right):
From left to right: Amber Cintosun, Dr. Ayla Goral Cintosun and Ulfet Akin post with a young patient. (photo courtesy of Dr. Ayla Goral Cintosun).

¹ See Paul Waldie, "Lawyer recruits dentists, gathers donations to care for poor Jamaicans", *Globe and Mail* (June 13, 2015), B4



This page (left):

Dr. Fadi Swaida with children in front of Grange Hill Community Centre.

(photo courtesy of Amer Mohammed)

This page (centre):

From left to right: Matt Bladowski and Dr. Nohora Martinez with their kids, Dr. Fadi Swaida, Amer Mohammad, Peter Chudak, Parastou Carabash with Michael Carabash (holding Michael Carabash), Stefan Atalick, Amber Cintosun, Karen Ergus, Ljubica Durlavska, Dr. Ayla Goral Cintosun, Dr. Samantha Amaro, Ulfet Akin, Verna Kurtdarcan and Dr. Christina Bodea.

Missing from the picture were Dr. Sylvie Dagenais, Melissa Brunette, and Dr. Patrick Hackett and his team. Note: there were a few people from our team who were missing – such as Dr. Sylvie Dagenais (Gatineau, Quebec), Melissa Brunette (hygienist, Ottawa, Ontario), and Dr. Patrick Hackett and his team (Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario).

(photo courtesy of Michael Carabash)

This page (right):

Dr. Nohora Martinez with a very happy patient.

(photo courtesy of Michael Carabash)



Into the Inferno

When our team first arrived at the clinic, we were met with a crowd of a few hundred people waiting outside the gate. They had been there for hours. Some had tried to see a dentist or hygienist the previous week at that location, but to no avail. They were in physical pain and desperate.

My formal job title was “patient intake” but I prefer to call it “mob control”. This entailed trying to organize a few hundred people who were vying to get into our clinic all at once and being stopped only by a somewhat porous gate, a few community volunteers, and me. It eventually worked out such that we were able to give ticketed appointments to everyone for the course of the week, which helped calm the crowd and send people home.

Each group had two or three dentists, one or two hygienists, and support staff (patient intake and out-take, assistants, and sterilizers). Each clinic saw roughly 40-50 patients each day. Sufficed to say, it was busy! In terms of the set up, many volunteers commented on how well supplied and organized things were. Per Dr. Irena Szczesny (London, Ontario), “Although we made a temporary dental clinic in the middle of nowhere and under hot and ergonomically-challenged working conditions, we had sufficient equipment, instruments and supplies to treat hundreds of patients.”

Now, I am not going to sugar-coat it: the working conditions were very challenging. Dr. Christina Bodea described one particularly difficult afternoon and how she persevered as follows:

“The room was very hot. The few fans that we had only blew hot air at us. Our power went out several times. But I kept going because I wanted to make a person-

al connection with each patient. For the children, for example, I had brought down several small treasure chest ‘Toothfairy Boxes’. After extracting a child’s primary tooth, I would give them a ‘Toothfairy Box’ and say: ‘If you put your teeth in here, it will bring you good luck for the school year!’ They cherished those mementos. Their reactions were very heartwarming”.

Despite the difficult working conditions, many of us were motivated to treat as many patients as possible. As per Catherine Nguyen (U of T dental student and President of the ZIP fraternity), “It was an eight hour work day but didn’t feel that long. We were just excited to help as many people as possible and see the results of our work.” By the end of the week, we had treated over 730 patients at three clinics – something we were all very proud of.

Having a Moment

From the outset, Papa Joe told us not to focus on the numbers. “Slow down and have a moment”, he would say. “Let your surroundings affect you”. Each volunteer experienced this.

For Dr. Samantha Amaro (Toronto, Ontario) and her assistant/husband, Peter Chudak, that moment came when one particular little boy sat in their chair. He was completely deaf. As Dr. Samantha Amaro recalls:

“Despite his limitations, we were able to figure out what he needed to have done: extract two baby teeth. He was so cute and well behaved. He gave me two thumbs up throughout the entire procedure – even though I could tell he wasn’t comfortable at times. He never complained. I wondered how long he had been in pain for, unable to communicate.

Treating him was very emotional for me: I felt as if I made a huge difference in his life by doing those extractions. He motivated me to keep working hard and come back again. He was my favourite patient.”

Collaboration

Most of our dentist volunteers own/operate a practice in a competitive environment in Ontario. But in Jamaica, everyday business pressures were replaced with peer collaboration, serving others, and doing dentistry for its own sake. “It was refreshing”, recalls Dr. Samantha Amaro.

Case in point, Dr. Fadi Swaida (multiple practices, Ontario) was called in to help with a particularly difficult case. Another dentist had struggled for hours to extract a wisdom tooth (the tooth kept breaking and finally went below the gum line). Knowing that Dr. Fadi Swaida enjoys difficult extraction cases, he was called in to assist. He immediately rushed in, removed the gum and some bone to get access to the tooth, then elevated and pulled the tooth out in just a few minutes. Everyone was ecstatic. “I was so happy I could assist my colleague and relieve the patient of pain”, recalls Dr. Fadi Swaida.

Making a Difference

Taking a step back, it definitely seemed like an uphill battle. The insatiable demand for dental services resulted from historic and widespread poor oral hygiene/education, coupled with an inability for many Jamaicans to afford the dental services offered by private practitioners. It is a dire situation. Admittedly, some of our volunteers often felt more like a band-aid solution to a systemic problem. Here is how Dr. Nohora Martinez (London, Ontario) felt:

“I wanted to give each patient a beautiful smile. With limited time and resources and so many patients with so many cases to treat, I didn’t know if I was making a meaningful difference. Then I would do just a single extraction or filling and the patient would give me the biggest hug and smile to show their sincere appreciation. I knew at that point I was significantly improving the quality of their life. And mine too. It was worth it!”

Conclusion

It started off with a birthday wish – to have what Dr. Tim Milligan described in his acceptance speech as “the experience of my lifetime”. Having completed our first mission trip, I (and our volunteers) now have that. We struggled through very challenging working conditions and persevered. We made a physiological improvement in the lives of so many impoverished Jamaicans. But we also connected with them. And we socialized and collaborated with, and helped each other. After 10 days, we became better versions of ourselves with memories that will last a lifetime.

That was just the beginning. Soon, we will start the process of bringing another group of volunteer dentists, hygienists, dental students and support staff down to Jamaica for next year. If you are interested in volunteering, contact us. Many of our first time volunteers will be returning.

Additionally, we have set our sights on a new goal: to raise money to establish a free public dental clinic that runs all year long and which can accommodate Canadian dentists, hygienists, and support staff to volunteer a week at a time. It’s definitely ambitious. But it’s necessary and worthy of our time, money and effort. Let’s work together to make this our legacy. One love and Triple P!

This page (left): Michael Carabash motivating team “Triple P” as they approach Grange Hill Community Centre on Day 1.

This page (centre): Michael Carabash working with community volunteers to register patients for the week (a.k.a. ‘mob control’). (photos courtesy of Michael Carabash)

This page (right): Dr. Samantha Amaro and husband / assistant Peter Chudak with their favourite patient. (photo courtesy of Dr. Samantha Amaro).

