

IMMIGRATION

Toronto lawyer gives poor Jamaicans something to smile about

Michael Carabash leads team of Canadian dentists and hygienists in running free dental clinics in rural Jamaica.

By **Nicholas Keung** Immigration reporter

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Dentist Sylvie Dagenais shows off some of her handiwork with a happy patient in the makeshift dental clinic she helped out in in rural areas near Negril, Jamaica.

SUPPLIED PHOTO

Jamaica often puts a smile on the faces of Canadian tourists. But this time, it was a group of Canadians saving the smiles of impoverished Jamaicans.

Toronto lawyer Michael Carabash was lounging on a beach in Negril on his birthday last year when he bumped into a group of British and American dentists running free dental clinics for local residents.

He made a birthday wish that day to return to Jamaica this year with a team of Canadian dentists and hygienists in tow.

Carabash, whose law firm specializes in dental practices, and the team of 30 volunteers he recruited through his clients and contacts, spent a week hosting three clinics in rural Jamaica for hundreds of locals who couldn't afford a simple extraction or basic dental care.

"We had people lining up at the gate in early morning. They all had dire dental needs," said Carabash, whose volunteers were supported by Great Shape Inc., a facilitator of humanitarian projects in the Caribbean, and the Sandals Foundation, which provided accommodation.

"In rural Jamaica, they have one dentist for 100,000 patients. It's very inaccessible. Many have very little education about dental care."

Mississauga dentist Fadi Swaida is no stranger to volunteering at free dental clinics, having run similar endeavours for low-income and homeless people in Winnipeg while studying at the University of Manitoba. However, the experience in Jamaica was an eye-opener, he said.

"I did 70 teeth extractions over five days. It was hard because it wasn't perfect clinic conditions. There was no light. It's so hot we had to stay hydrated," said Swaida. "In Canada, we help patients get care. There, we just try to get people out of pain."

Melissa Brunette, a hygienist from Gatineau, Que., said she did 14 cleanings during her eight-hour shift each day at the free clinic and was surprised to see gum and teeth problems in teenagers that one normally would only expect to see in people in their 60s.

While many of her young patients had really clean, white teeth, looking under their gums revealed tartar and big cavities, she said. A quick lesson in proper flossing followed.

"They didn't do it right because no one ever taught them how to do it," she said.

Brunette said it took the volunteers some time to adjust to the makeshift clinics.

"We had suction that weren't working well. I was wearing this frontal light on my forehead, so I could see inside the patient's mouth. I could only move my eyes, and not my head. Otherwise, I couldn't see," Brunette recalled.

"But it's all worth it. I received so many hugs. I feel like the number one hygienist in Canada, because now I appreciate my work that much more."

Brampton's Catherine Nguyen was among five University of Toronto dental school students who joined the mission.

"We could only do one procedure per patient, but sometimes people needed multiple. It was hard to limit treatments, since we wanted to give everyone comprehensive care," she said. "What was most gratifying was seeing people smile. It's a great learning experience on so many levels."

Not only is Carabash already planning the next mission, he said he is raising money for a permanent volunteer clinic there.

One week in Negril, Jamaica

2,142: Patients seen

752: Cleanings provided

1,406: Teeth extracted

548: Filings performed

302: Fluoride applied