

Mesa dentistry school gives children reason to smile



Dr. Jack Dillenberg is dean of the dentistry school at A.T. Still University's Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health in Mesa.

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By David M. Brown

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Approximately 325 needy children from Mesa, Apache Junction and Gilbert are sporting brighter smiles after A.T. Still University's Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health conducted its eighth annual Give Kids a Smile treatment day.

In partnership with the Arizona Dental Foundation, Scottsdale, A.T. Still staff and third- and fourth-year students provided free dental treatments at the school's clinic as part of 1,700 similar events across the country, according to Dr. Jack Dillenberg, dean of the dental school in Arizona. A.T. Still, a Kirksville, Mo.-based university, established the nation's first college of osteopathic medicine and Arizona's first dental school.

Participating Mesa School District elementary schools included Lowell, Holmes, Jefferson, Brinton, Longfellow, Taft, Johnson and Superstition Mountain. Apache Junction Unified School District children attended from Four Peaks and Desert Vista elementary schools, as well as Cactus Canyon Middle School. The Concordia Charter School, serving the Mesa area, also sent children, as did Quartz Hill Elementary in Gilbert.

Each child received at least a cleaning and oral hygiene instruction about fluoride treatments, twice-daily brushing, wise food choices and regular dental care. As diagnosed, some children also received specialty-care procedures such as sealants, fillings, stainless steel crowns, pulp therapy such as root canals, and extractions.

The National Institute of Dental & Craniofacial Research estimates that children miss 52million hours of school annually due to oral health problems, Dillenberg said.

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"The program not only provides critical treatment to our patients but also inspires our students to become high-quality, community-minded leaders to serve those most in need while focusing on holistic health care, a mission of A.T. Still University," Dillenberg said.

Approximately 33 dentists offered their services, including 16 A.T. Still faculty dentists, 10 alumni, and several community dentists and endodontists. In addition, nine hygiene faculty volunteers and 30 staff volunteers assisted. Supervised by the dentists, 240 students, 55 pre-dental students and 36 dental-hygienist students from Mesa Community College participated.

"Participating is important for me because it provides an opportunity to both go out into our community as well as bring our community into the clinic," said third-year dentistry student Jessica Lecy-Hunter a Gilbert resident who served as student co-lead for the program "It oftentimes can be the first or only dental experience for these kids, and we all want it to be a great experience."

The future dentists also better understand the barriers many face in accessing dental care and how community clinics can help overcome them, she said, adding, "Additionally, I have learned the impact you can have on each child, his or her family and their community."

Celeste McGavock of Gilbert brought her three children, Madison, 12; Braden, 10; and Jace, 8, all students at Quartz Hill Elementary School in Gilbert.

"As a parent, I think this is an awesome program that not only provides a much cheaper alternative to have dental work done while still receiving a high quality of service," said McGavock, who learned about the program through her nephew, Charles Brown III, a third-year dentistry student and co-student lead for Give Kids a Smile.

"This event is important to me because it addresses needs in my community," said Brown, who grew up in Mesa and attended Johnson Elementary, one of the participating Mesa schools. This is his fifth year participating.

"Many children that do not qualify for AHCCCS and are not covered by private insurance cannot afford dental care, and events like these help them receive the care they need," added Brown, who plans to open a practice in the Mesa area.

"I'm happy to say that the elementary school that I attended participated this year, and we treated children from my home neighborhood," he added, noting that the event helps him refine his skills with volunteers and organizing. "I hope that one day I will be able to offer my own event for the community."

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