

Dental Tour of Duty



Dr. Michael Lovda (center) is joined by (from left in foreground) Hands and Hearts organizer Teri Dreher, and his daughter, Kathryn, and son, Michael.

IN AMERICA, DENTAL PHOBIAS ARE A COMMON, irrational fear. In Nigeria, this fear is a rarity. Why? Nigerians haven't had the luxury of the bi-annual checkup that so many of us take for granted. In fact, many adult Nigerians haven't ever been to a dentist. Tooth decay, infection, and tumors in the mouth go untreated, as well as fatal diseases that take millions of lives each year.

South Barrington resident and dentist, Dr. Michael Lovda, heard about a Rotary Club International project in Libertyville that had teamed up with Hands and Hearts International to lend a helping hand to Nigeria. The plan was to send a variety of United States professionals overseas to run short-term clinics and presentations to help get the Nigerians out of poverty. A variety of people attended this massive conference including social workers, businessmen, and dentists. "I was looking for something rewarding to do," said Lovda. "When the opportunity arose to accompany a medical mission group and provide dental

treatment in Nigeria, I believed it would be a great way to visit and provide service to people that the world rarely visited. My son, Michael, and my youngest daughter, Kathryn, agreed to go."

Preparation involved more than throwing a few T-shirts into a suitcase. It was essential to pack as much dental gear as possible into minimal space. If equipment didn't fit to travel, it wouldn't be found in Nigeria. Lovda's equipment filled nine out of the 40 vans brought by the club project. Two dental chairs were made by a local dentist out of lumber and plywood, although it was uncertain if they would be suitable for the trip. "I still had lingering doubts as to my ability to provide appropriate care with the limited facilities available," Lovda admits.

Boarding the plane two days after this past Christmas, the trip was almost cancelled altogether, as a safety precaution. "There was a bomb threat. The leader of the trip almost backed out, but we decided not to. Airport security really is non-existent," Lovda said. After a grueling flight



Michael Lovda helps a Nigerian resident at the Ohaji Compassion Center.



Dr. Michael Lovda (center) and his son Michael and daughter Kathryn traveled to Nigeria with Hands and Hearts International in association with Rotary Clubs International to provide dental and medical services to Nigerian residents.

that lasted a day and a half, the crew landed safely, and witnessed no violence or threats for the rest of the trip.

Lovda and his family stayed in a bed and breakfast in the rural town of Owerri. “We woke up at 7 a.m. and there was a limited amount of food. We would get in two vans provided by an oil company, one of the exports of Nigeria. We traveled 45 minutes to the area of the clinic,” Lovda said. Upon arrival, Lovda met with an unexpected partner, Dr. Dan Gbujie, a Nigerian dentist, who would also be working at the clinic. The two hit it off. “I felt like I had found a long-lost brother. And what a brother! An adrenalin-soaked Chris Rock clone,” he said.

The camaraderie took a backseat as the grueling work began. Working in terrible conditions, Lovda met challenges along the way. The clinic was a far cry away from a suitable office – a concrete floor without doors. Exquisite lighting has yet to be found. The lighting got about as high-tech as headlights purchased from Home Depot. However, most operations were performed by daylight.

Electric equipment is vital to a dentist’s work, and power outages occurred regularly. With no electrical power coming in from power lines, the country has but only modest generators, which

creates terrible pollution. After plugging in electrical equipment, they became utterly useless. Lovda was involved in the evolution of a generation of tooth removal instruments, including prototypes not yet released to the dental community. This new technology enabled Lovda and Gbujie with the assistance of Michael, to perform 350



Michael Lovda with some of the thousands of people they met on a medical mission to Nigeria.

emergency surgeries. Nigerian dentists rarely have access to state-of-the-art technology.

Kathryn worked as a secretary and maintained crowd control. During these procedures, many patients arrived at night, sleeping on the ground for days at a time, waiting to be treated. When not immediately assisting her father,

Kathryn accompanied the group members who offered business counseling at a local community college. Roughly 1000 students attended. “This was a spontaneous thing for them. The students were very appreciative. They came over and told us how great the United States is,” Lovda said.

Okey’s “Ohaji Compassion Centre” remained open for seven and a half days. Other health needs were met. The life expectancy of the average Nigerian is 47 years old. This statistic is unsettling; however, it’s getting worse with the quality of life decreasing each year. “To see 5,000 people undergoing medical conditions that had progressed to terrible stages was very saddening,” Lovda said. “I saw severely decayed teeth, infections, bones sticking out of bodies that had never healed, and a young boy with a large tumor in his mouth. Some people had never seen a dentist.”

“Thankfully, the team was able to provide treatment to the majority of individuals. Medications were dispensed, especially anti-malarial. Custom eyeglasses were assembled. When feasible, surgeries performed. Lives were improved.” Lovda said. U