



## Dentist Sinks His Teeth Into Volunteerism

Dr. Byron McKnight takes a bite out of life at every turn. He's an avid cyclist who stays in shape by riding 100 or so miles at a pop while some of his colleagues leisurely play 18 holes of golf. He's spent half of his 50 years building one of the leading dental practices in Mesquite. And he donates countless hours to making sure that economically disadvantaged individuals in East Dallas County – as well as poverty-stricken people in other parts of the world – have access to quality dental care.

"Everybody is blessed," McKnight said, "And what you choose to do with your blessings determines who you are. Our practice has been blessed. And the idea of giving back just seems normal. For me, it's important to create a balance between the gifts I get and the gifts I give back."

McKnight is the Dental Director of Mission East Dallas (MED), a volunteer clinic that provides medical and dental care to low

income people who otherwise couldn't afford it. Although area churches support the clinic, its outreach is non-denominational. The common denominator at MED is human healthcare need.

When MED opened its doors in January 2003, the clinic was initially a medical facility. McKnight heard about MED and immediately volunteered to add dental services to the mix, which was a bold commitment. While setting up a staff of dental volunteers was a monumental task, equipping the dental side of the clinic with hardly any funds was an even greater challenge.

McKnight put the need out to his suppliers and the area dental community. Between a retiring dentist in Arlington who was liquidating his entire office, an X-Ray machine that was available in Waco and a number of other sources, McKnight secured enough equipment and supplies to outfit two dental chairs at MED. By March 2003 – just two months after MED opened – McKnight,



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**Atul K. Singhal, MD**

his business partner Dr. Ken Taylor and other area dentists were providing dental care at the clinic on a volunteer basis.

"The goal was to create a private practice environment and offer it to people who couldn't afford it," McKnight said.

Aside from management duties, McKnight donates a half day a month to seeing patients at MED. The other dentists likewise contribute a half-day a month on a rotation schedule. Through an affiliation with Baylor Dental College, senior dental students periodically work alongside dentists and help lighten the expanding patient load.

For McKnight, MED represented the opportunity for him to give back to his home community. But he had been giving back to the world community for over a decade.

Initially McKnight and his wife Bibi – who is tri-lingual – started taking dental services to Guatemala on a scale that was probably as under-developed as the Guatemalan villages they served. But in the process of getting the job done, they fell in love with the people and made a commitment to brighten the smile on those friendly faces.



**Dr. Byron McKnight and a dental patient at Mission East Dallas**

"We just put some supplies and equipment together, went down

there and set up wherever we could find a place," McKnight said. "Some of the people there had never seen a dentist. And they hiked as long as 10 hours just to get some dental work done. In the first village that we went to, people lived in shacks with dirt floors. Only 15 percent of the people had electricity. And they had one phone for 6,000 people. Over the years, we've worked in those environments and we've worked in cities."

But McKnight's vision was to open a permanent facility in Guatemala and secure volunteer support from a large network of medical and dental professionals. Three years ago, he went on a dental mission trip to Romania for 10 days and approached the group that hosted the trip about starting a clinic in Guatemala. In July of last year, Byron and his colleagues opened a medical and dental clinic in San Raimundo, which has a population of 26,800 and consists of 10 outlying villages.

McKnight is not only making a difference at MED and in Guatemala; he's making a difference in the world to come by teaching his four children the value of volunteerism. The Guatemalan project, which started with McKnight and his wife, has evolved into a family affair.

"My 23-year old daughter is a med student, so she has a vested interest in going down there," McKnight said. "But we'll have all the kids doing something this year. They're old enough to help. They might assist. They might do sterilization. Or they might work in the kitchen."

Like most volunteers, McKnight said the emotional rewards of helping others far outweigh any time factors involved.

"I promise you," McKnight concluded, "I'm the one that gets the most out of it."

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