



In Service to Others

NYU dental student gets head start on career by organizing dental clinic for impoverished villagers in East Africa.

Ruben Cohen

THE TOWN OF ARUSHA in East Africa is located about two hours southwest of the famous Mount Kilimanjaro, and about six hours by car from the capital of Tanzania, Dar es Salaam. The town and the region that surrounds it are home to more than two million people. This is where this past August a team of students and faculty from New York University College of Dentistry helped to inaugurate the Dr. Herman Wrice Youth Empowerment Community Center.

The brand new center had been built by Miracle Corners of the World (MCW), a nonprofit organization headed by Edward Bergman, a junior at the New York University School of Continuing and Professional Studies, who at an early age had become involved in outreach programs abroad. We met at NYU, where we lived in the same dorm. He told me of his ambition to promote self-sustaining outreach projects abroad. When Eddie described for me his project in Tanzania, I immediately suggested setting up a dental clinic there to treat the local residents.

The dental team that traveled to Arusha consisted of Anthony Vernillo, D.D.S., Ph.D., a professor at NYUCD; Mai Nguyen, a second-year dental student at NYUCD; and myself. It took considerable effort and persistence to get us there.

Having decided to open the clinic in Arusha, I started making phone calls and looking for others at the College of Dentistry

who would be interested in participating in the project. Dr. Vernillo and Ms. Nguyen, a first-year dental student at the time, offered their assistance.

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I was in contact every week with the New York office of the United Republic of Tanzania to the United Nations, but I was determined to make this happen. I had just returned from a trip to the Dominican Republic with other students and faculty from NYUCD. I had seen how such a program is put together, so I had some knowledge of what needed to be done. I faxed letters to Tanzania, back and forth, every month to the local authorities to obtain proper approval for our project. At the same time, I had started to contact various dental manufacturers and distributors to request

free supplies. I finally reached some very interested people at Henry Schein, Inc. I had heard that Schein supports a number of outreach projects, such as Schein Cares, where they match financial donations. They were very interested in my project, especially since it was being organized by a dental student.

By June, Henry Schein, Inc., had generously offered a substantial grant to support this project, and had agreed to donate over \$15,000 in instruments and supplies. Once I had received the support of Henry Schein, there was no doubt in my mind that this trip was finally going to take place.

On Aug. 6, we headed to Newark Airport to board an Ethiopian Airline flight to Tanzania. Equipped with more than a dozen bags and boxes and armed with an official letter signed by the ambassador, we arrived at Kilimanjaro Airport. We presented our documents, and passed through customs.

We set up the clinic within the community center. Eddie explained that the center had been built for use by the families in the village. Initially, he said, only classes were offered for children who had no other means of education. But goals had broadened to include athletic activities and computer training. Once the dental team arrived, he noted, "We began teaching these children how to hold a toothbrush and brush their teeth."

The clinic had two plastic lounge chairs that were pressed into service as dental chairs. Each patient filled out a questionnaire that

had been translated into Swahili. Once the patient was seated, a full dental evaluation was performed, using a data entry sheet based on a form obtained from the World Health Organization. I had just spent the summer at the National Institute of Craniofacial Research (NIDCR), where I had received help in designing a data collection sheet.

Dr. Vernillo and I performed the oral exams, while Ms. Nguyen assisted us. The majority of patients presented with severe yellow and black stains on their teeth. I had never seen such severe cases of fluorosis. We were told that the fluorosis was most likely caused by the water or salt in the region. Most patients complained about thermal sensitivity. Some had dental infections, but, overall, the rate of caries was not extremely high, probably because of the fluorosis.

Within eight days, we had screened and treated more than 200 patients, performed prophylaxes, operative procedures and extractions. While at the NIDCR, I had done some research on international dental programs, and learned about a procedure called atraumatic restorative treatment (ART). Through further research, I learned that the procedure is used to fill carious teeth simply by using an excavator and glass ionomer. We brought the material with us and used ART to fill a number of carious lesions, and found that the procedure is quicker to use in the field than the standard amalgam treatment.

During our visit to Arusha, we had a chance to meet the regional commissioner who oversees the region of Arusha, Daniel Ole Njoolay, and the dean of the faculty of dentistry at Muhimbili University College of Health Sciences in Dar es Salaam, B.S. Lembariti. Both officials were very supportive of our humanitarian mission, and both expressed interest in working with us in the



Young visitors to Liana Cohen Health Clinic show off their new toothbrushes.



Ruben Cohen, who helped establish dental clinic in Arusha, East Africa, tries to calm frightened child with "balloon" glove.



Cohen, fourth-year NYU dental student, examines patient. Severe fluorosis is a common problem in region.



At makeshift clinic, plastic lounge chairs are pressed into service as dental chairs.



Mr. Cohen with Kate, a University at Pennsylvania undergraduate, who assisted at dental clinic, and young patient.

near future. They talked about possibly staffing our new dental clinic year-round through a collaborate effort between NYUCD and Muhimbili University.

On our last day in Arusha, MCW held an opening ceremony of the Dr. Herman Wrice Youth Empowerment Community Center. Hundreds of families came to show their support and to thank us for our services.

We plan to return each year to Tanzania and continue this program. Our efforts were very well received by the community. These people have no access to dental care, and many said they will wait for us to come back to be treated. Most people cannot afford basic medical services, so oral health, which is hardly looked upon as a necessity, is not a priority for them.

The Liana Cohen Health Clinic we founded is dedicated in memory of my sister. Liana was killed nine years ago when a drunk driver struck our car. The other members of my family, myself included, were severely injured in the accident.

Liana was a strong advocate of community projects and human rights, and always wanted to help others. She had hoped to begin her life's work when she entered college. As that opportunity was taken away from her, I wanted to dedicate my first community service project in her name. ■

Mr. Cohen is a fourth-year student at New York University College of Dentistry. He is a past president of the NYU Chapter of the American Student Dental Association, and currently serves as the ASDA-ADEA Student Commissioner on the ADA Commission on Dental Accreditation. He plans to begin a combined Ph.D. and oral and maxillofacial surgery residency at Louisiana State University in New Orleans this fall, and then organize outreach programs abroad for children with disfiguring diseases.