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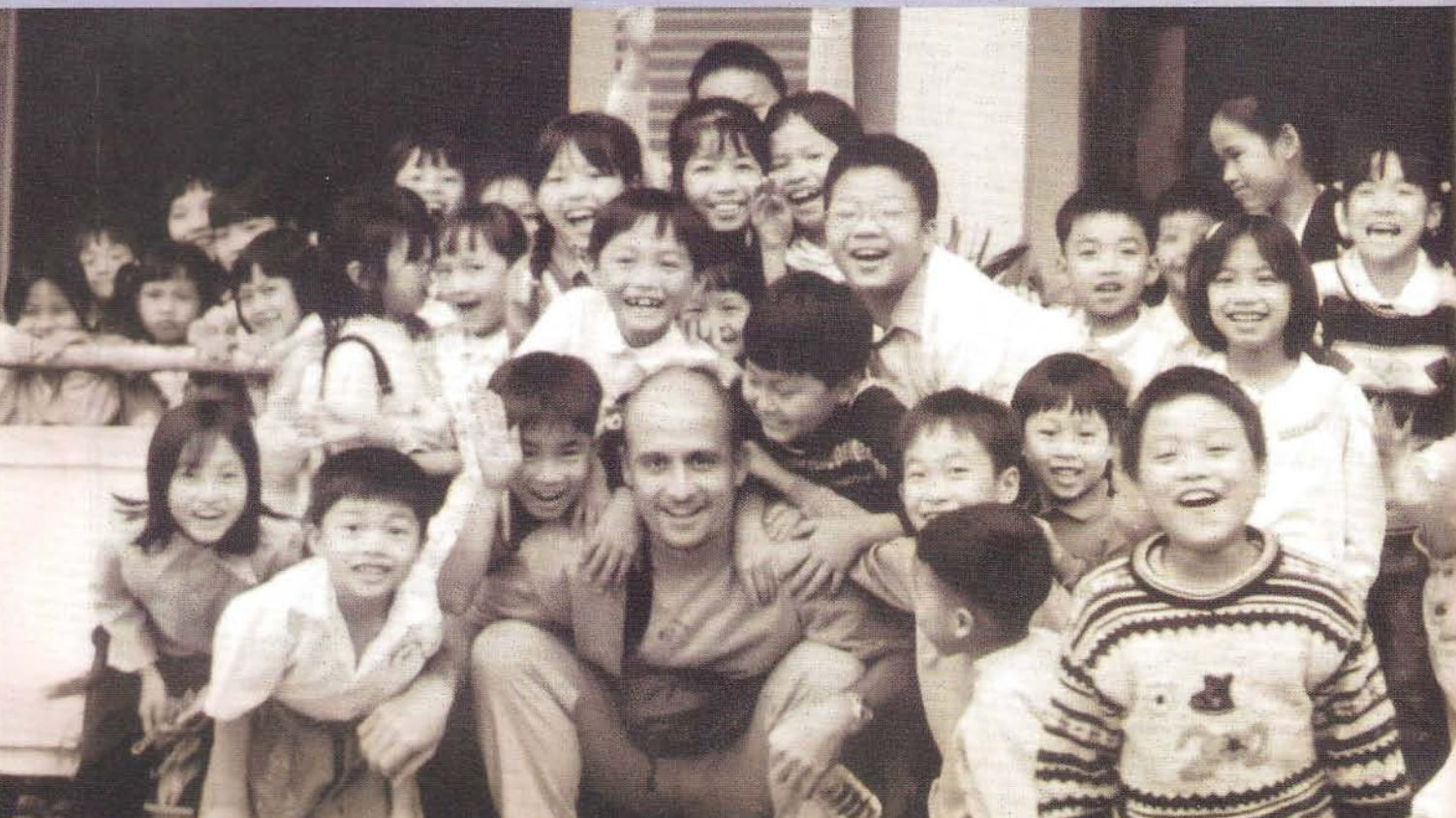
Operation Smile
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DR. D. MICHAEL GIOFFRE JR., ORGANIZER OF
OPERATION SMILE'S DENTAL MISSION TO VIETNAM,
STANDS IN FRONT OF ENTRIES FOR HIS POSTER CONTEST

SOMETHING TO



A young local dentist brings oral health care to the Vietnamese through Operation Smile. by Shannon Canton

Photographs of smiling Vietnamese children line the walls of dentist D. Michael Gioffre's Pike Creek office — the children are smiling because of him. Since 1997, Gioffre has educated the people of Vietnam about oral hygiene, taught the dentists there modern techniques, and provided dental care to as many patients as possible. When he travels to Vietnam every year with boxes of toothbrushes and toothpaste and a team of 13 to 26 volunteer dentists from all over the United States, Gioffre puts smiles on hundreds of faces.

As a dental student at the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, part of the University of Maryland, Gioffre became friends with a classmate, Billy Magee. Magee is the son of the co-founders of Operation Smile — a non-profit organization that provides reconstructive surgery and related health care to indigent children in developing countries and in the United States. Many children in poor countries are born with cleft lips

and palates because of poor nutrition, so Operation Smile sends groups of doctors to operate on the children and fix their smiles. In the name of Operation Smile, Magee started the dental mission that brought American dentists to Vietnam, a country in desperate need of improved dental care. Gioffre joined Magee on the second annual dental mission in 1997 and took over the next year. He has been running the mission ever since. Having made five visits in the past five years, Gioffre has begun to see the progress he is making.

In a communist country where the average family makes \$300 a year, the people of Vietnam lack adequate oral health care. Many Vietnamese work in the fields and chew sugar cane all day. Others suck on candies as they become more Westernized. Since the water is not fluoridated and the people don't brush twice a day — many have never seen a toothbrush before — they are much more susceptible to cavities

SMILE ABOUT



Clockwise from the left: Dentist Mike Gioffre sits in front of the clinic in Vietnam where he provides dental care for hundreds of children every year; Vietnamese children hold toothpaste and toothbrushes they received from Operation Smile; poster contest winners show their drawings that portray oral hygiene; Drs. Gioffre and Arpose with American volunteers, Vietnamese dentists and children who were treated at the clinic; an American dentist performs a dental procedure while a Vietnamese dentist observes.

and decay, Gioffre says.

The Vietnamese dentists also have a different philosophy about providing care, Gioffre says. With 5,000 patients per dentist and limited resources, anesthesia is not commonly used. "They drill without pain relief," he says. Dentists also use silver filling because it is less expensive, but it is made mostly of mercury. Disposable plastic gloves are washed and hung to dry, not thrown away. And needles are also reused.

The first time Gioffre went to Vietnam, the young dentist tried to treat as many patients as possible in the two weeks he was there. "I realized I took a nibble out of a huge mountain," Gioffre, 30, says. After seeing patients, he realized he couldn't save the older adults' teeth, which had a lifetime of decay, but he could prevent the children from suffering future dental problems by giving them a toothbrush and toothpaste and teaching them how to brush. "The more lasting effect is to

teach the importance of brushing twice a day," Gioffre says. "And to teach dentists why it's important to save a baby's teeth instead of pulling." What began as a mission to treat patients soon became a massive education campaign.

In Vietnam, Gioffre and his Operation Smile team go to schools and hand out toothbrushes and toothpaste, then teach children how to brush. But they can only visit so many schools during their short trip. So Gioffre created a poster contest in which elementary and middle-school teachers receive educational pamphlets about oral hygiene. They teach the children, who make posters to demonstrate what they have learned. The Operation Smile dental team reviews the posters, picks winners and holds an awards ceremony. Prizes include \$100 cash (four months salary for the average Vietnamese family). The first year, Gioffre says they received 5,000 posters. When he

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Something to Smile About

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arrived in Vietnam this April, 75,000 posters were waiting for him. "It means that many kids learned about oral hygiene," Gioffre says.

Another educational aspect of the Operation Smile dental mission is teaching the Vietnamese dentists the skills and technology of Western practice. Gioffre has recruited Dr. Robert Arm, chairman of the department of dentistry at Christiana Care's Wilmington Hospital, where Gioffre completed his dental residency. Arm says he was skeptical about the missions at first. Gioffre took time off during his residency to go to Vietnam, and Arm says he thought it "sounded like a junket — fun."

"But Mike said, 'No, there's lecturing,'" Arm says. "I'm a lecturer." With oral medicine and oral pathology specialties, Arm has spoken at many conferences and published a number of books and articles, so he was drawn to the June 2000 mission. "I was shocked at the educational background of the trip," Arm says. American dentists gave lectures, and Vietnamese dentists received chair-side instruction while the Americans treated patients. "From 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. there is education and patient care," he says. "It basically converted me to being a real supporter of Operation Smile."

Arm says they had to open the door slowly with the Vietnamese dentists. They couldn't just go into the clinic and tell them that what they were doing was wrong. They had to form friendships and earn trust before they could begin to improve the standards of care. The Vietnamese dentists welcome the new technology, Gioffre says. "We can wow them with a presentation on dental implants and give them the equipment to do it themselves," he says. But instruction has to come without insult. When the sterilizers that the Operation Smile dentists brought to the Vietnamese clinic broke, they had to use the machines there. Patients started getting infections because the equipment was not sterilized long enough. "You have to be a diplomat," Arm says. "You can't say, 'You're doing it wrong.'" Instead they politely give a seminar on proper sterilization, Arm says.

While working to improve the Vietnamese standards, Arm says, the American dentists also improve themselves. They have to be open-minded. "You have to know that different people treat different things different ways," Arm says. For example, he learned about herbal and naturalistic healing, which is becoming more mainstream in Western practice. Arm also brought back a patch containing an aspirin-like substance, which the Vietnamese stuck to their temples to relieve pain. He's going to have it analyzed to see if it can be used in the United States.

But while education is key, Operation Smile's main goal is to treat patients, and Gioffre and his team of dentists accomplish as much of that as they can in the two-week trip each year. The American dentists see patients in the Hanoi clinic, where they do extractions, root canals and other needed dental work while the Vietnamese dentists observe.

In the past two years, Gioffre says, they have also begun to travel to more rural areas, screening and treating chil-

dren in schools and communities where some have never seen an American before — or a dentist. During each dental mission, the Operation Smile dental team screens 1,500 to 2,000 children and treats 500 to 700 of them.

The satisfaction of providing dental care to a child who would not otherwise receive it motivates Gioffre. "In Delaware, you are bound by political red tape because you worry about insurance coverage and if they can afford it," Gioffre says. "The beauty of Vietnam is that you see a kid with a need and provide the service you were taught to provide. It's the purity of 'I'm here to do good, they need help.'" The children lack the preconceived fear so many Americans have about dentistry, so they are very well-behaved in the chair, Gioffre says. "They are not familiar with the needle, so they sit still," he says. "You only see a tear trickle down their cheeks."

Dr. Dominic M. Gioffre Sr., Mike Gioffre's father with whom he shares a practice, says his son spends hours of his free time organizing the trips, recruiting

volunteers, raising funds and getting sponsors. Gioffre has even accompanied his son on a mission. "It's neat to watch Mike participate and put the trips together. It's something he thoroughly enjoys doing," he says. "I'm rather proud of him."

The father's praise seems modest for a son whose efforts and dedication have had such a widespread effect in Vietnam. He is responsible for the oral care provided to hundreds of Vietnamese patients and for the education of thousands more. He has also improved the quality of dental care by teaching new procedures to the dentists there. "I think that's the impact we'll make over time," Gioffre says, "education and sharing of knowledge between us and them." His work has only just begun. He plans to branch out the mission to include more rural areas of Vietnam. He also wants to send dental missions to China, Cambodia and Thailand. "It's addicting," he says. **DT**

Shannon Canton is Delaware Today's assistant editor. Contact her by e-mail at scanton@delawaretoday.com.



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