



## Healthy Smiles in Africa: A Dental Hygienist's Vision

by Mandy McGill, DHP(C) • [mandymmccgill@gmail.com](mailto:mandymmccgill@gmail.com)

The desire to travel off the beaten track has offered me rich and fulfilling experiences. Driven to volunteer in another country, I decided to continue to carve my own path. This is a story of my volunteer adventure.

In 2017, I was driven by a passion to share my knowledge and skills in a global capacity. I was inspired to volunteer in another country by a dental hygiene colleague who shared her own amazing experience with me. I began to dream of ways I could contribute my personal and professional skills to underserved communities around the world.

As a dental hygienist working in community practice, I am experienced in facilitating oral health and disease prevention programs.

Focusing on maternal and early childhood education, I use a multidisciplinary approach to share oral health knowledge throughout the community. I love my career as a dental hygienist—having the knowledge, skills, and perseverance to be a change agent, to make communities healthier, and to implement sustainable change. Reflecting on my values and my experiences in community health, I followed my heart to initiate sustainable oral health programs in Africa, a continent I had yet to explore. My goal was to make a positive and long-lasting impact for generations to come.

While conducting a comprehensive review of online literature and research, I discovered the World Health Dental Organization (WHDO), a US non-profit. WHDO established the Maasai Dental Clinic in Kenya with a goal of relieving dental pain and suffering among the Maasai people. The Maasai people are an Indigenous ethnic group with distinct traditions and age-old rituals. I learned that WHDO had just completed the construction of an education centre to support its outreach programs. What a coincidence. A centre built for my purpose! I eagerly reached out to the organization to share my vision for oral health programs and the stars aligned. Shortly after,



WHDO presented me with an opportunity to lead in the development of their education programs. I keenly accepted the challenge, and my dreams became reality.

An adventurous spirit and a bit of courage motivated me to step into the unknown. I filled duffle bags with dental supplies and set off on my journey. My final flight was on a tiny bush plane, landing in the Maasai Mara National Reserve. Zebras, warthogs, and wildebeests scattered from the dirt tarmac as the plane landed. I was then in for a bumpy ride in a Land Rover to reach the Maasai Dental Clinic. Upon arrival, I was greeted with bright smiles. The local clinic staff immediately made me feel at home.

The dental clinic is situated in a beautiful, remote location. The closest village is a 20-minute walk with one river crossing. You walk through the river to get to the village. Wild animals roam freely in the area, and an electric fence around the clinic and education centre prevents the elephants from entering the clinic grounds. The sounds of lions and other animals can be heard at night, as though they are right outside the safari tent. What a nature-at-my-doorstep rush!



>>>> Home & Away  
*Healthy Smiles in Africa: A Dental Hygienist's Vision ...cont'd*



I hit the ground running. Using the Dental Hygiene Process of Care (ADPIE) framework, I designed and implemented two oral health programs: 1) maternal/early childhood; and 2) school based. Both programs utilize a collaborative community approach. A local dental staff member was trained to facilitate the programs year-round. Watching her grow into an inspiring and respected role model and community leader throughout the years has been a highlight. We are now in our fourth year of successful program implementation.

Discovering the unique Maasai culture was fascinating and instrumental in the development of culturally sensitive and relevant educational materials. A chewing stick the locals call "Osokonoï" contains antibacterial properties and is commonly used to clean teeth. Of cultural significance is the extraction of lower anterior incisors, leaving a space for esthetic purposes. Infant oral mutilation is also prevalent in the area, a practice that involves the removal of an infant's erupting canines thought to be worms or nylon teeth, or the cause of childhood illnesses.



I have been to Kenya three times now over the past three years and continue to support and foster the growth of these programs. The oral health promotion efforts have empowered individuals and communities and resulted in increased access to dental education and services. Medical professionals and teachers are engaged, further enhancing the promotion of oral health and sustainability. You can learn more about these ongoing projects at [worldhealthdental.org](http://worldhealthdental.org), Facebook, and Instagram. Contact me if you are interested in additional details.

I feel privileged to be in a profession where our unique skill sets can be shared, making positive contributions and effecting change worldwide. Currently, I am working with WHDO as their program director and am forging ahead on additional meaningful projects. My story continues...

