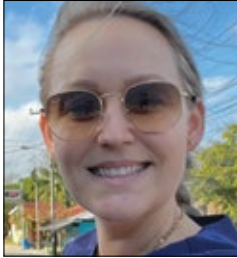


Dental Hygienists

Home & Away



Jungle Dentistry
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Jungle dentistry is often how people describe the volunteer trips that take place in the rural areas of foreign countries. El Remate, Guatemala, is far from that.

In 2020, I was able to participate in my first volunteer trip thanks to an organization called Dentistry for All (DFA). I reached out to my current employer, Blue Ocean Dental Group (BODG), which is always encouraging opportunities to give back and they agreed to sponsor me on this trip.

Preparation started. Representatives from my office of practice, Dover View Dental, came forward. They offered donations for me to take down to El Remate, the location of DFA's first permanent clinic in Guatemala.

I think nothing could have prepared me for what I experienced on this adventure. On our first morning after arriving in Guatemala City, we flew to Flores, a quiet little island on the pristine Lake Peten Itza. A shuttle took us to Gringo Perdido, a small resort near El Remate, with the jungle of Guatemala as our backdrop, howler monkeys and all. Gringo Perdido would be our home away from home. I never did get used to the monkeys' little dance on our roof each night. Delicious meals were prepared for our team; hot pots of tea and coffee were always brewing over a wood-burning stove. After we had settled in, we made our way to the permanent clinic and started our clinical adventure.

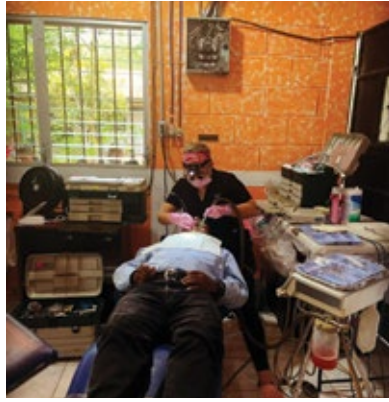
DFA spent years organizing and fundraising to set up their first permanent clinic. This clinic exceeded all my expectations. Each operatory had a huge fishing tackle box filled with all the tools and sundries we would need to navigate through the day. Volunteers arrived ahead of time to prepare. A sea can (a large shipping container) housed all the necessities of the clinic and thankfully had arrived safely. We saw more patients than I could count. Even with the language barrier it was humbling how gracious the patients were. The people of Guatemala have a beautiful kindness about them. After a late dinner and debrief, we slept—a well-deserved night's rest after Day One.



The next week was a whirlwind. We were lucky enough to experience working a remote clinic in San Pedro. On arrival we found our folding dental chairs positioned in front of patients waiting to be treated. It was daunting to have an audience, but we quickly got to work. Curious little faces peered in through the windows and watched as we worked our way through the day.

One of the biggest challenges of this trip was the children. Anyone in dentistry or dental hygiene knows that treatment does not always go smoothly. We had incredibly skilled pediatric dentists on this trip. After the first day I overheard someone comment, "If I don't work through the tears then in a month they could be in pain and there will be no one here to help them." That resonated with me. From that point, seeing little bodies wrapped in a sheet beside me while they underwent treatment was a positive thing. Little reassuring smiles at the end of the appointments and thankful parents made those hard days matter.

It was rewarding to see the progress that is being made with the schoolchildren. The clinics are working. These children had sealants and are brushing their teeth. The consistency provided by DFA has been so important in sustaining these preventive efforts.



Families in El Remate don't always have a clean water supply. Soda is less expensive and safer to drink than water so it's a choice a lot of parents sadly make. All the acid and sugar are part of the reason for such a high caries risk in the local population. Our translators helped provide the education about making smarter choices when they are available which is so key in the prevention of caries.

DFA has created a network in Guatemala. Local dentists and health professionals collaborate on these volunteer trips. One man local to El Remate, Alex, is in charge of the organization of patients, which is a key part of these trips' success. Patients were screened prior to our arrival so we could utilize our skills and time efficiently. Oscar, our trusted driver, was the eyes and ears of the operation. His dedication to the people is something to which we all should aspire.. Oscar met us in Guatemala City, piled all of the supplies onto a little pick-up truck, and made sure everything arrived safely the very next day. There are many people who are such a crucial part of the machine that is DFA. Their hard work and compassion are what keeps everything moving.

I felt obligated to see as many patients as I could in the brief time we were there. There were always more people to be seen. It was hard to walk away from that at the end of a clinic day.

We had so much help within the clinic. After a cleaning, I would walk my patient to the triage area and, before I could return to my chair, it was clean. Translators bridged the language gap. You could not distinguish between oral health professionals and regular volunteers on this trip.

When a patient went through the initial triage, their name and treatment were recorded on a piece of duct tape. At the end of the appointment each provider would write what they had completed on the tape. The duct tape was placed on the wall outside the exit of the clinic. It was incredible to visualize the efforts in such a beautiful way.

The days were long, and the heat was sweltering. Every night when I laid my head down, I felt such gratitude for everything I have. DFA taught me a new level of compassion. Saying goodbye was emotional because these people's lives were changed forever by such a simple act of kindness.

Fast forward to 2023 when the need for oral health care is greater than ever. The kindness of my employer BODG and the organizational efforts of DFA allowed me to venture again into the jungle of Guatemala.

During the three years since my first adventure with DFA, people went without access to oral health care. The group travelling down was half the size of the last. This made the hot days longer and harder, which was rectified by a dip in the pristine lake to wash the day off. I was grateful to see a lot of familiar faces and anxious to meet all the new faces. Each one left a lasting impression.

The clinic had stood the test of time. The solar panels installed in 2020 collected power and illuminated the clinic well. The local team maintained the clinic and provided oral hygiene instruction and support.

The remote clinics were sadly not possible during my second trip. This setback did not stop the Mayor of San Pedro. He filled a bus and made the journey to us instead. Everyone who made that journey was seen.

The people of El Remate were unbelievably grateful to see our smiling faces again. The children playing in the courtyard of the clinic and anxiously awaiting their treatment brought smiles to everyone's faces. The graciousness of the people we helped every day made even the longest, hottest days worth every minute. The people depend on the support of this clinic, and I feel as though it's our job as individuals with so much to give this little bit back.

Saying goodbye a second time was even more emotional as the faces were familiar. Rather than saying goodbye, we said, "I will see you next year". DFA makes the change in these people's lives possible. The volunteers, donors, and people in the background make all of this magic possible and I am lucky enough to have been part of it twice. For that I am forever thankful. To learn more, including 2024 mission dates, visit dentistryforall.org.