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Hugs, Tears, Thanks

Drs. Peer, Priest: Serving The Truly Deserving

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It was an open-air dental/medical extravaganza at the Wise County Fairgrounds last month with an estimated 500 patients lining up each day seeking treatment.

Patients in mobile dental chairs were side-by-side, stretching the length of the tin-roofed pavilion, according to South Boston's Dr. Mike Peer. Dental supplies were stacked neatly nearby on card tables.

Portable lights, even flashlights, were essential.

If it rained, no one left. Some patients were in pain. "Some had gotten there at 2 p.m. the day before to get in line, get a number and wait," added Peer.

Patients were screened and prepped before they reached the dental chair.

During his two-day volunteer Mission of Mercy, Peer would see about 35 to 40 patients and fill approximately 50 teeth. He was assisted by a dental student from the University of Louisville.

And Peer was not alone. "I would say 40 or 50 dentists were there, but they had a multitude of dental students from Richmond and also from Louisville," he said.

He also saw 150 different people helping to provide services, either direct services, assisting dentists or triage screening.

Halifax County oral surgeon Dr. James Priest was just as busy inside a mobile surgical unit.

"It was like M*A*S*H," said Priest, recalling the popular television portrayal of a Korean War medical unit.

And like M*A*S*H, the two dentists were challenged to deliver dental services to those truly in need.

Priest estimates he extracted 200 to 300 teeth during the Wise County mission, a combined Virginia Dental Association and RAM (Remote Area Medical) project.

No one could be put to sleep during the dental procedures since only a local anesthesia was used, explained Priest. Still, only one patient opted out.

"Some of these patients required all of their teeth out," recalled the oral surgeon. "We were taking out an average of 15 to 30 teeth per person coming in."

Some of his patients were in their early twenties, others were older.

"Some people there had never been in a dentist's chair in their life," added Priest. "They were truly deserving people."

"It was rewarding," he said. "People would get up out of the chair and they would hug you and they would be in tears. They were very very appreciative of everything you were doing."

Priest's surgical assistant Gail Felton and UVa senior Christina Manning, who plans to be a dentist, accompanied the oral surgeon and Peer.

"For me in surgery, if I had not had those two it really would have slowed me down," said the surgeon.

Although Priest said he could

have done the work, he said without their assistance he thought he would have seen about half the number of patients. "But with Gail and Christina, we were flying."

Both dentists saw unemployed and disabled patients. "And you saw a lot of other people who had jobs," Priest added, recalling a waitress at a fast-food restaurant and a dog breeder from Michigan.

"A lot of these people had jobs but unfortunately what you find, even in our area, you have people who work but they are caught in the middle. They are making enough to survive but not enough for insurance, not enough to have elective dental or health treatment."

Follow-up is another patient problem.

Priest said one patient had all of his teeth removed last year but could not have dentures because he needed additional work.

This year, the excessive bone was removed and now the patient can get dentures. "But a lot of these patients will go without dentures," the surgeon said.

A cardiologist told Priest that he sees patients each year but they return the next year because they do not have resources for follow-up care.

Peer encountered similar problems.

He particularly remembers one patient.

"He was an older man," began the dentist. "He said he was disabled. He thanked me before (the procedure), during it, and after it. He said, 'You don't know what this means to me, having this done.'"

"There would have been no other way he would have been able to have it done," said Peer softly.

While most patients were from the Wise County area, the two dentists said they encountered patients from Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia and Michigan.

"Most had family ties or were from the area," explained Priest.

For Priest, the Wise County trip was his second mission trip.

Martinsville was his first.

"The one in Martinsville was a one-time special because of the textile industry shutdown, because so many people were out of work," he said. "Whether or not they will come back, I don't know."

"I would like to see one come here eventually," he said. Although he doesn't know if it would be feasible, Priest said, "We have enough situations right here in our own county."

Thus far, a total of 18 M.O.M. projects have been held in Wise County, the Eastern Shore, Northern Virginia, Martinsville, Norfolk and Grundy.

To date, 12,919 patients have been provided with over \$4.7 million worth of free dental care, according to the Virginia Dental Association.

The dentists volunteer their



MISSION OF MERCY — Volunteers pictured (left to right) are Christina Manning, Dr. Priest, Dr. Peer and Surgical Assistant Gail Felton

time, pay all their own expenses, and, in some cases, take some of their own equipment to the mission. Priest said some den-

Will Priest return to Wise County?

"Oh, yes," he replied quickly.

"He's already made reservations for next year," added Peer, who's also ready to make the six-hour return trip to Wise County.

Why would the two dentists be willing to get up at 5 a.m., begin work at 6:30 a.m. and finish at 5 p.m. each day?

"It is a very humbling experience," said Peer of the mission. "There are people out there that appreciate your God-given talents and say 'thank you'."

"You don't have to go out there and try and make a buck every time," he added. "You can provide a service for your fellow human being and feel good about it."

Priest also sees the mission as a blessing for the giver.

"God fortunately gave me a gift of surgery," he said. "I was fortunate to be able to do this and I am going to have a hard time standing in front of Him on that judgment day and not having given something back

from what He has given me. Especially having come back from this illness (Guilliam Barre) I had. I'm just happy to be able to go out there. It's a gift for me, not them."

"I hope we can expand this thing and get more people from this area to go out there and join us," said Priest. "It would be very helpful for everybody. Once you get there and see what you do, it makes it all worthwhile."

"As I understand it from the VDA, other states look at ours as the premiere volunteer program in the nation," said Priest, "and other states pretty much copy it."

'We didn't set out to save the world; we set out to wonder how other people are doing and to reflect on how our actions affect other people's hearts.'

Pema Chodron
M.O.M. Project - 2005

