

EASING THE PAIN

Bergstrom leading America's Dentists Care Foundation

Foundation helps Mission of Mercy provide free dental care in nine states



LEBO – Bruce Bergstrom remembers a defining moment five years ago that fueled his passion to help others. His wife, Millie, a dental hygienist, asked him to join her on a Mission of Mercy in Garden City. Missions of Mercy are two-day dental clinics held around the country by volunteer dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants and staff. The Garden City event, in 2003, was the first to be held in Kansas.

The night before the event, the Bergstroms arrived in Garden City near the end of a 10-inch blizzard. The next morning, before daylight, they rode a bus to the Finney County Fairgrounds, the site for the event.

Bergstrom remembers the bus pulling into the parking area. “The headlights panned across the blowing snow to a line longer than a football field of people huddled and braced against the wind and driving snow,” he said. “Many had no coats, only blankets.”

Then there was an active little boy with no shoes. Bergstrom asked where his shoes were and his very young Hispanic mother said, almost defiantly, “He has no shoes.” However, the boy announced proudly, “I have five socks!”

“It was at that point I became committed to helping these poor and underserved folks any way I could,” Bergstrom said.

Bergstrom has been a lay-volunteer at every Kansas Mission of Mercy (MOM) event since. He has

volunteered for events in other states. In all, he has 12 missions under his belt. And he found a way to help more.

In February, a number of dedicated dentists and businessmen from around the country formed America's Dentists Care Foundation (ADCF) in Kansas City.

Bergstrom, who retired in January 2004 following a 25-year career at Wolf Creek Generation Station, serves as the executive director of the 12-member ADCF board of directors. The corporate office is in the basement of Bergstrom's rural Lebo home.

In addition to Bergstrom, the board of directors includes President Jeff Stasch, DDS, Kansas MOM; Vice President Steve Anderson, DDS, Nebraska MOM; Secretary Robert Schreiber, DDS, Connecticut MOM; Treasurer Richard Smith, DDS, Texas MOM; Terry Dickinson, DDS, Virginia MOM; John Hanck, DDS, Colorado MOM; Dick Hettinger, DDS, Iowa MOM; Harry Hoch II, Nebraska businessman; Steve Kilpatrick, DDS, Arkansas MOM; Edie Mauldin, E.D., Arkansas Dental Association; and Jon Tilton, DDS, Kansas businessman.

“We are a fledgling nonprofit corporation dedicated to assisting state dental organizations in providing free dental care to those who are underserved,” Bergstrom explained.

The Mission

Mission of Mercy events must be approved by the host state's dental association. Typically, more than 100 volunteer dental professionals and several hundred lay-volunteers are needed to stage the two-day event; they pay their own way to get to the event. It takes a nonprofit dental organization about a year to solicit the \$100,000 in donations needed to cover the cost of the event.

Free services are provided to patients on a first come first serve basis. In a day, about 1,000 patients receive treatment that includes cleanings, fillings, extractions, oral surgery, root canals, denture repair and oral hygiene education. There is such a great demand for these services that lines of patients begin forming in the middle of the night. Doors open at 5 a.m. and generally close a few hours later.

MOM events are generally held once a year. In 2009, events are planned in Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Iowa, Wisconsin, New Mexico and Connecticut. Multiple events will be held in Virginia and Texas, where MOMs have been held since 2000.

“Collectively, we have treated over 25,000 patients and provided over \$11 million worth of free dental care,” Bergstrom said. “Virginia and Texas have their own equipment and have served another 25,000.” ADCF’s Role ADCF was formed to help facilitate the state MOMs. “Our role is to provide the semi-load of equipment it takes to set up a 90-chair dental clinic – almost like a MASH unit - and assist with the set up, the tear down and the logistics to help make the event successful,” Bergstrom said.

According to Bergstrom, New Jersey is working to set up an organization and talks are under way with individuals from Ohio and Missouri. In addition, Virginia has partnered with West Virginia and one of the Carolinas.

“The movement is growing,” he said. “Our mission is to help 40 states hold these wonderful events by 2015.”

That will present a challenge to ADCF. “It will take several semitrailer loads of equipment possibly staged in various states or regions,” Bergstrom said. “Each semi trailer (of equipment) costs about \$500,000, so we have our work cut out for us.”

Special Meaning

“The amazing thing about these events is that no matter when or where they are held, the lines are always long, many also must be turned away because there are just too many to treat,” Bergstrom said. The first priority at any MOM event is pain abatement. “If we can provide these patients at least a pain free night’s sleep, that’s our primary goal,” Bergstrom said. “Beyond that, we do as much as we can for as many as we can in two 12-hour days.”

Bergstrom shared some of the memorable events from the 12 MOM events he has attended.

“What sticks out in my mind are the lines,” he said. “That first experience in Garden City with the people standing out in the dark in a blizzard.”

In Kansas City, at the Kansas Speedway, the line stretched nearly a quarter mile long in 102-degree weather and waiting cars backed up onto I-435.

In Topeka, 23 people slept on the Expo Center concrete all night despite a bitter cold low temperature of 4 below zero.

In Alamosa, Colo., 500 people waited in 23-degree weather and one lady drove six hours to get there at midnight only to find out she was 212th in line.

In Little Rock, Ark., Bergstrom was told several thousand waited through the night. The first few in line had young children and it was unusually cool, so extra blankets were swiped from the motel rooms and

distributed among the waiting families. Bergstrom said every blanket was returned the next day.

In Tolland, Conn., one of the wealthiest states in America, Bergstrom walked the waiting line at 4:30 a.m. in the rain and counted 365 waiting. A U.S. Senator from Connecticut spoke of the event on the Senate floor the following week, which eventually led to some national news coverage.

Two months ago, in Loveland, Colo., Seth Doane of CBS Evening News and Bergstrom walked the line at 4 a.m.

There were more than 500 waiting, including the Rogers family interviewed by Doane and featured on the July 23 national evening news. Recently, a Newsweek Magazine article covered a MOM event in Virginia.

“These are the memories that stay with a person,” Bergstrom said. “That here in the greatest country in the history of the world, good people, hard working people have to stand in line in the dark for care as basic as getting their teeth fixed.

“Volunteering for any of these ‘MOMs’ is a life-changing event, an extremely positive experience,” Bergstrom said. “Visit our Web site at www.adcfmom.org, and look at our national schedule. You might just couple up some volunteer work with a vacation to some place you’ve always wanted to go.”

Kansas MOM

The next Mission of Mercy in Kansas will be held Feb. 20-21 at the National Guard Armory in Manhattan. The Kansas Dental Charitable Foundation sponsors the event.

Since 2003, Kansas Mission of Mercy has treated 15,000 patients. Each MOM event treats about 2,000 patients worth about \$1 million in free dental care.

More information about the KMOM project is available by visiting www.ksdentalfoundation.org.