

GIVING THEM A SMILE

Marshall dentist and staff member make a mission trip to Mexico to provide children with free dental care

By Deb Gau

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It's not exactly a weekend getaway — the days are long, and the conditions can be tough. But it's worth it to make a difference in the lives of impoverished children, Dr. John Frerich said.

Frerich, a Marshall dentist, and Kristie Karl, a staff member at Marshall Dental Excellence, recently returned from a trip to Mexico, where they and other people volunteered to help give kids healthy smiles.

"It was really rewarding," Frerich said of the experience.

The trip was organized by a non-profit called Dental Care for Children, Frerich said. DCFC was founded in the early 1990s by dentist Dr. Charles Tozzer, and works to provide free dental care for children in poor communities in southern California, Mexico,

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Haiti and other places. The group makes several volunteer trips a year, and Frerich and Karl were part of a mission to the community of Ensenada in Baja, Calif. on Nov. 4-6.

"There are usually about four doctors that go" on the trips, Frerich said. In addition to dentists, volunteers include dental students at the University of Southern California. Partnerships with both U.S. and Mexican Rotary clubs help make the trips possible, too.

"It's all very well-organized," Frerich said. After several previous DCFC missions to the area, local people have come to recognize the van. "They're

happy to see us."

To reach Ensenada, the volunteer group drove across the U.S./Mexico border in a van carrying supplies and mobile equipment, from anesthetic to x-rays and portable dentist's chairs. They would set up temporary clinics in locations like orphanages, churches or schools.

"We go anywhere," Frerich said. On their most recent trip, volunteers worked inside a church kitchen.

Ensenada is a very poor area of the country, Frerich said.

"These are areas where sometimes there are no roads," he said. Many people hack into power transmission lines for electricity in their homes. The need for medical services like dental care is great.

Many of the children who come to DCFC as patients are in severe need of care, Frerich said. Volunteers often needed to prioritize which teeth to save. The rule of thumb is to take care of the kids' permanent teeth first, he said.

The dentists try to go by a philosophy of "Nobody gets everything, everybody gets something," Frerich said.

Frerich has also had a chance to be part of DCFC's mission to the community of Les Cayes, Haiti. While the Mexico missions last for a week-end, Frerich said, the Haiti trips are a little longer and a lot more physically demanding. Part of the challenge comes from the amount of work volunteers do — "We try to work at least 12 hours a day," Frerich said — and part is the tropical climate of Haiti. "Once you put your gloves on, you're sweat-

ing," he said.

Despite the hardships, he said, "It's a great trip to go down there, because the kids are so appreciative."

Working with the children, and in some cases being able to build relationships with them is one of the most rewarding part of volunteering with the organization, Frerich said.

"I think if you can change the life of one kid . . . it's like the domino effect," Frerich said.

Frerich said he knows enough Spanish and Creole to get by on the missions, but that's not so important when working with the children. "The language with kids is just love," he said. Being caring and working as painlessly as possible helps a lot.

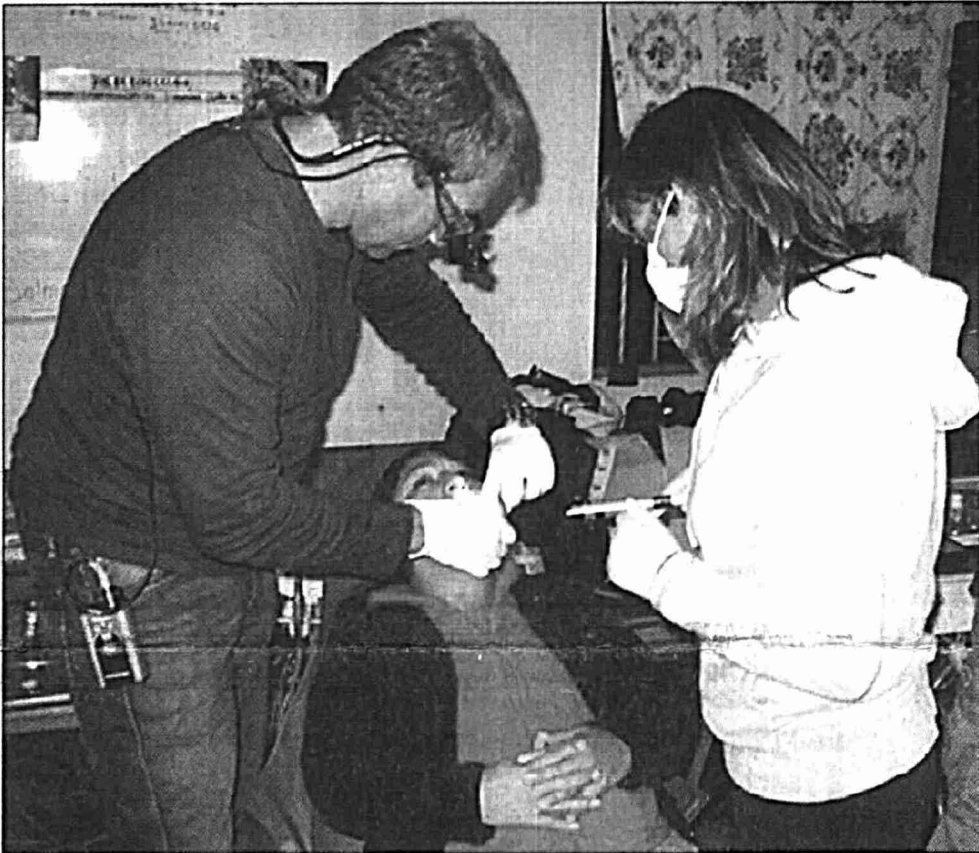
He also enjoys the opportunity to develop mentoring relationships with the dental students volunteering with DCFC.

"When I was young, I don't recall having someone who mentored me," he said, so it's good to be able to share experiences.

Frerich said he would like to see DCFC come to work in Minnesota. He said he is trying to work with USC to allow some of its dental students to volunteer in Minnesota. So far, it's a slow process, but he appeared confident that the organization could get established.

"There is a need here," he said.





Submitted photo

Marshall dentist Dr. John Frerich and Kristie Karl work with a young patient in Ensenada, Mexico, during a volunteer trip earlier this month. The trip was organized by an organization that travels to poor communities to provide free dental care.