

March 17, 2010

[REACHING OUT Hygienist hits the road to help with kids' oral health](#)

BY BETTY ADAMS Staff Writer

WINTHROP -- When the current crop of middle-schoolers smiles, credit some of those bright white, healthy teeth to the efforts of Susanne LaVallee and a handful of dental hygienists.

LaVallee, who lives in Winthrop, founded Maine Dental Health Out-Reach Inc., formerly known as "Tooth Angels," five years ago, after working as a hygienist for the late Dr. Thomas Lee, a Farmingdale dentist. Maine Dental Health Out-Reach Inc., is a not-for-profit 501c3 charitable organization.

She said Lee was her inspiration.

"A lot of his clients were low-income, Medicaid people," she said. "He was a great guy and it didn't matter that he didn't make the money someone else did."

After his death, she heard from former patients who were unable to find a new dentist.

"I thought, 'I can help these people,' " she said.

So she embarked on a career as a "public health supervision" hygienist. This allows her to practice "in a public or private school, hospital, custodial care institution or other nontraditional practice setting provided that the services are rendered under the general supervision of a dentist with an active Maine license," according to Maine law.

Working under the indirect supervision of Dr. Barbara Oesterlin, a dentist in Augusta, LaVallee and the hygienists working with her have provided some basic dental care to about 3,200 children over the past five years.

They are reimbursed for some of that care through MaineCare, formerly Medicaid.

"Unfortunately Medicaid does not pay for adults," she said. "The kids say their parents have totally rotten teeth."

The hygienists do cleanings, exams, place temporary fillings and do referrals.

"We're able to do temporary fillings, which work out great on baby teeth," she said. "Then the new teeth come in and get sealed."

If the hygienists do a temporary filling, they tell the parents that the child must be seen by a dentist within 30 days. Most times, that doesn't happen.

"We've worked very hard with dentists' offices, and we have a core of seven or eight dentists that will see our kids," LaVallee said. "Last year we had over \$32,000 of donated dental care from dentists who work with our program." Oral surgeons help as well.

The results are in the numbers.

LaVallee just spent a month treating 144 children in the Livermore school system, about 14 percent of the total enrollment. She's worked with the children there for five years and those in middle school show a significant reduction in the number of cavities.

LaVallee works with the schools in the Gardiner and Livermore areas, Augusta, Monmouth, Hallowell and Farmingdale and provides hygiene services to children without access to care, generally children whose families have no dentist. She said 99 percent of those children are on MaineCare.

The hygienists use purple disclosure tablets, which children chew, to show them where they failed to brush properly.

"They look at that and go 'Oh, gross,'" she said.

LaVallee and her fellow hygienists work out of a 32-foot recreational vehicle that LaVallee purchased.

"This is our third winter in the van," she said. "That allows us to treat children in a clean, healthy environment and it allows us to work in a clean, healthy environment.

"Before, I was hauling equipment in and out of any space in the school not being used -- showers, closets, bathrooms, on stage with one light. In one locker room, I could smell rotten, sweaty, athletic gear. I thought, 'Some day I'll be treating them in a really great environment.'"

LaVallee's 85-year-old father-in-law, Chet LaVallee, is the corporation's secretary-treasurer.

"He spends most of his time calling MaineCare to find out eligibility for the children," Susanne LaVallee said. "He's never taken a penny (for his work) since 2003. Quite frankly I couldn't afford to pay anybody to do it."

Because only some of the services are reimbursed through MaineCare, LaVallee must find other ways to stay afloat financially.

She recently asked groups in the Livermore Falls Business District to contribute to some of the costs of treating Livermore students.

"We have to do screenings on all these kids," LaVallee said. An exam is billable at \$20, but MaineCare will not reimburse hygienists for that or for placing temporary fillings. "We spent \$5,250 that we will not see one dime from Medicaid on even though it costs us time and energy and supplies."

LaVallee feels compelled to do those temporary fillings. "If you cover the decay, it does not spread."

She works regularly during the school year, but not as much in the summer.

"The reason this program works is because we are where the kids are," LaVallee said. "If we had to rely on parents to get kids to us, it wouldn't work. They're barely surviving economically."

Children qualify for service from LaVallee's group if they have no family dentist or have not been seen by a dentist for the past six months.

"If they have better teeth, their life is better, and maybe they can get a job if they're teeth aren't rotten," LaVallee said. "Teeth are important."

Oesterlin, LaVallee's supervising dentist, said, "What she's doing is tremendous for these kids. She's placing these really nice temporary fillings, and she's seen some of the kids who in two years have not made it to a dental office and the temporary material is still intact. It helps to prevent more tooth decay. She's buying these kids some time before they end up with a toothache or a tooth extracted."

For more information about LaVallee's program or to donate to her charitable organization, go to www.mdho.org.

Betty Adams -- 621-5631

badams@centralmaine.com

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