

Dental group aiding poor children in central Maine wins grant for new van

cm 23.253.170.163:10442 /2014/12/12/dental-group-aiding-poor-children-in-central-maine-wins-grant-for-new-van/

By Michael Shepherd Staff Writer mshepherd@centralmaine.com | @mikeshepherdME | 207-621-5632

AUGUSTA — Jaimie and Rebecca Nirza, 11-year-old twins in sixth grade at Gilbert Elementary School, were back in Suzanne LaVallee's dental chairs on Friday morning for the first time in five years.

"When I was younger, I always tried to hold still," Rebecca said before reclining back in hygienist Sherry Laliberte's chair. "I used to freak out sometimes, but not anymore."

Photo Gallery

Since 2003, Maine Dental Health Out-Reach, run by LaVallee, a Winthrop dental hygienist, has given 6,400 appointments to school-age children like the Nirzas at more than 30 schools from Richmond to Jay. Almost all of the students — 98 percent — qualify for coverage under MaineCare, the state's version of Medicaid, the federal health care program for the poor.



"I've been a hygienist for over 30 years and nothing is as satisfying as this job," LaVallee said, "because you know that if we weren't here, there would be no care."

Now, LaVallee visits central Maine schools and gives appointments with help from other hygienist in an 18-year-old converted and cramped RV with that she bought through Uncle Henry's classified ad service.

But that will change soon. Earlier this month, LaVallee's group announced that it got a \$350,000 grant from the Next Generation Foundation of Maine, which will replace the van, add a third dental chair and expand services to pregnant women and children up to age 4.



Once they're signed up, odds are that their teeth will get healthier. Last year, LaVallee said 38 percent of the program's 294 new students had cavities. Of the 307 patients making return visits, 77 percent had no visible decay.

But getting kids into the van can be a challenge. LaVallee said only 25 percent of area children who are eligible for care get signed up by their parents.

"I love her service," Ellie Lutrzykowski, the school nurse at Gilbert, said of LaVallee, who serves approximately 70 kids at the Augusta school. "I think the kids benefit from it. I wish more kids did take advantage of the service."

LaVallee called herself "a missionary in my own backyard," placing an emphasis on educating kids about oral health. Each appointment begins with a disclosing solution that highlights plaque in purple, so kids can see what areas they're missing. At the end, they get a grab bag and pamphlets on how to keep their

teeth clean.

“We’ve got to make sure that our diet is really good,” hygienist Kala Myers-French told Jaimie as she worked on her teeth, “because if we feed them lots of sugar, they get to make a lot cavities.”

On Friday, the Nirzas got some sealants and temporary fillings before being referred to a dentist’s office for more care, but there was a lot of improvement.

As Rebecca prepared to leave the van, she was talking about the purple dots on her tongue from the disclosing solution and the strawberry flavor left over from the paste used to clean her teeth.

But LaVallee was admiring Laliberte’s work.

“I’m thrilled,” she said.

Michael Shepherd — 370-7652

mshepherd@centralmaine.com

Twitter: [@mikeshpherdme](https://twitter.com/mikeshpherdme)

Share

[Read or Post Comments](#)

Were you interviewed for this story? If so, please fill out our [accuracy form](#).

[Send questions/comments to the editors.](#)

