

ON A MISSION TO ECUADOR

Branford Dental Care takes part in Adopta Una Familia project



All smiles - These young patients look happy to see visiting dentist, Dr. Robert Hacker of Branford Dental Care.

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

It was a cool July evening in Branford and Maria Hacker confessed she was a little anxious. Ensnared on a chair amid cartons of dental supplies and a group of enthusiastic volunteers at Branford Dental Care on Montowese Street, she probably had reason to be.

In three short days, the soft-spoken 16-year-old Branford High School junior would travel to the impoverished Ecuadoran barrio of Guasmo Sur to participate in a mission that would provide free dental care to more than 100 children.

Sure, her father, Dr. Robert Hacker of Branford Dental Care would be there, and she could hang out with contemporaries Spencer Lowlicht, 14 and Jerry Gargano, 16. Moreover, there was hygienist Kathy Moran and dental assistant Sara Wolfley from her father's office, both of whom were uniformly

steady and upbeat, as well as Jerry's older sister Stephanie, 22, a veteran of five previous missions, who could tell her anything she needed to know about Guasmo Sur.

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According to Stephanie, a recent Penn graduate with plans to attend UConn Medical School in the fall, few of the kids who would be treated had

ever owned a toothbrush. Those who had one commonly shared it with their entire family. Guasmo Sur did have a dental clinic, she added, as she packed restorative materials and bonding agents into a suitcase, but it operated with equipment that was less than state-of-the-art. And it required patients to pay out of pocket, which effectively made it, for a population that earns an average income of \$200 a month, out of the question.

The weeklong dental mission was an extension of the Adopta Una Familia project, which was founded by Rev. Erica Thompson (then Smith) in 1999. As a



Photo by Arnold Gold

Left to right - Dental assistant Sara Wolfley, Ted Gargano, hygienist Kathy Moran and Stefanie Gargano finish packing at Branford Dental Care for their trip to Ecuador to do pro-bono dental work in Ecuador.

Peace Corps volunteer, she had witnessed the lack of safe drinking water, basic sanitation and electricity in most of the houses, not to mention the generally slum-like conditions in Guasmo Sur, and grew determined to do something about it.

Erica's mother, Linda Smith, had long ago set her sights on a dental mission. In the last decade, Smith,

a hygienist who in April retired from Branford Dental Care, enlisted upwards of 300 volunteers, initially from the First Congregation Church of Branford, then, as word spread of Adopta Una Familia, from more and more churches. Ranging in age from 13 to

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91, they started by building bathrooms, progressing to entire two-bedroom houses. After five years of work, they recently completed a new community center named Mi Cometa, or My Kite, symbolic, Smith said, of dreams that take flight.

"Each of the participants paid their own way and gave up vacation time," e-mailed Smith, who was already in Guasmo Sur prescreening the children at Mi Cometa. Each participant also submitted to immunizations and updated passports. Each of the dentists—Dr. Hacker, along with Drs. Joseph Gargano and Roger Lowlicht, an oral surgeon—donated dental supplies from their own offices, with Jerry Gargano spearheading a drive for toothpaste and toothbrushes at St. Theresa's Church in Branford. Each was armed with antibiotics, Immodium, Pepto Bismol, and anti-itch spray—as well as protein bars and, at least in the case of Maria Hacker, a healthy dose of nerves.

Once arrived, though, Maria was too busy to think about anything other than what she was doing. Along with Spencer and Jerry, she encamped at the community center, passing out goodie bags of brushes

and toothpaste. Using a red dye that showed where plaque on the teeth had built up, they instructed the kids on how to brush it off. They also walked them through the games and activities centered around dental health in work books they had created and had translated into Spanish prior to the trip.

By the middle of the week, the three were assisting the dentists at the clinic, which was housed in one room of a maternity hospital. Conditions weren't ideal. In the room was a small air conditioner. By afternoon, it would grow quite warm, requiring a supplemental fan. Still, the team worked non-stop for 10 or 11 hours, with a short lunch break provided by one of the families in the barrio, cleaning, filling, and extracting up to 40 to 50 teeth each day.

The most prevalent problem was tooth decay, dental hygienist Kathy Moran said. "It's simple: too much sugar, too many three-liter bottles of Coca-Cola, too much starch in their diets, but unfortunately, it's pretty much all they can afford." Which meant "the older the child, the more time for the decay to worsen, the plaque to harden." As a result of the work the team did on their teeth, though, she estimates they probably added 10

years of dental life; at the very least, they'll now know how to clean their teeth properly.

At night, there was constant noise – roosters crowing, dog barking, music playing, people talking, church bells clanging. In order to sleep, Moran and dental assistant Sara Wolfley needed ear plugs, eye masks, and mosquito netting; the windows of their host family's two-story cinderblock house were mere cutouts covered with a sheer curtain or sheet. Most of the houses had running water, but it wasn't clean. While showering, they were told to keep their mouths closed.

Outside, the poverty of Guasmo Sur was plain, said Moran. Stray dogs roamed. Trash fires burned in the street. Open sewage ditches, in which plastic bottles and cans floated, befouled the air.

Nonetheless, as the week wore on, the steady buzz of activity at night took on an almost musical quality. Perhaps, Moran surmised, it had something to do with the infectious spirit of the people of Guasmo Sur. "The most amazing thing about the community is to see how happy they all are, despite having next to nothing. The houses are worse than anything I've seen in the U.S. But

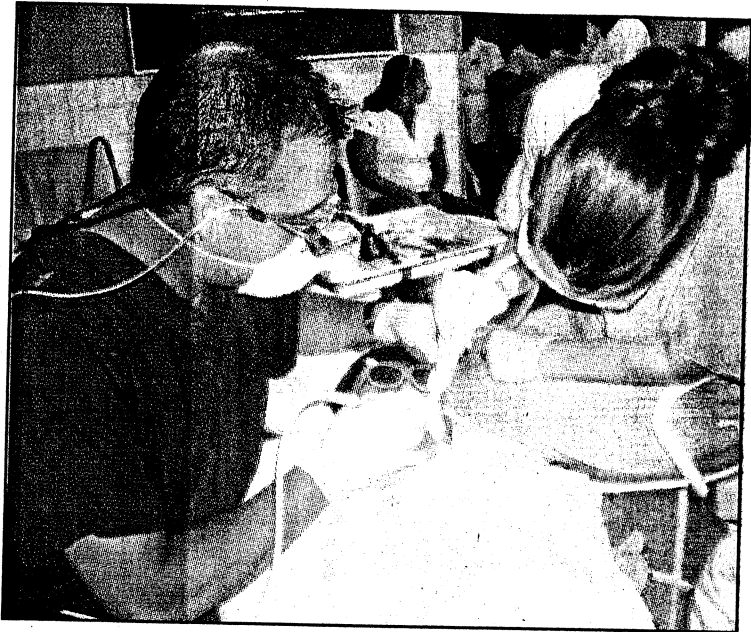
find work in Ecuador rewarding

that doesn't seem to weigh on these Ecuadorians like it might on us."

That kind of simple joy seemed to have rubbed off on the group. "We laughed harder than we ever have," said Moran. One afternoon, the radio played 'YMCA' and everyone knew the moves and was dancing around the clinic. On his down time, Dr. Hacker did magic tricks and made balloon animals for the kids.

On the last day of the mission, a 17-year-old girl named Mafer (short for Maria Fernanda) was seen by Dr. Hacker. He filled eight molars and noticed that one of her front teeth was chipped in jagged little points. He restored it with composite, then shaped it and smoothed her other front tooth. When he was finished, Maria accompanied Mafer to a bathroom mirror. As Maria tells it, one look at her reflection and Mafer burst into tears, rushed out of the bathroom, and threw her arms around Dr. Hacker, repeating Gracias, Gracias, Gracias. Then she hugged Sara Wolfley, who had assisted Dr. Hacker.

"It's that kind of thing that made it all worthwhile," said Maria, who plans to go on another mission next summer.



Above, Dr. Robert Hacker of Branford Dental Care and helper working on a young patient. Right, the poverty of Guasmo Sur was plain, said Moran. Stray dogs roamed. Trash fires burned in the street.

