



Keystone explorer

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School children in a remote village of southern Vietnam learning how to use a toothbrush.

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Charitable Dentistry: THE ULTIMATE TEAM-BUILDING EVENT

By Christy Young, PAGD Keystone Explorer Assistant Editor

Dr. Lori Cockley has practiced dentistry in her East Berlin, Pennsylvania, office since 2002. But it's her work outside of those office walls that may be the most meaningful. Dr. Cockley volunteers her dentistry skills both within the U.S. and abroad, having a tremendous impact on patients and communities in need.

"I have always wanted to volunteer, and the dream of an international dental mission trip was forefront in my mind even when I was in dental school," said Dr. Cockley.

Of course, a new practice didn't allow her the time or funds to pursue this dream at first. But after a few years and with the interest of her staff in doing a team mission, she explored her options for service.

"In searching for the perfect mission, my main criteria were in finding one that was well organized, had a restorative and prevention focus, and was going to be safe for us," explained Dr. Cockley. "Also, while we didn't mind roughing it a little, I hoped we would be afforded some basic amenities. A good friend of

mine from dental school was active with *Operation Smile Vietnam* and was heading up a dental team for a 16-day mission, and invited us to be a part of it. I think my staff was a little shocked when they found out we were going to Vietnam but it didn't take them long to warm up to the idea, and we got to work right away planning the fundraising."

BELOW: When we were in Orange Walk, Belize 2014, we set up a clinic in a hurricane shelter. The villagers waited outside. **RIGHT:** There are only 35 dentists in the country and while we were set up for that week, we had the most advanced dental clinic in the country. Several Belizean dentists came to work with us, watch and learn.



That was back in 2009, and since then Dr. Cockley returned to Vietnam in 2011 with *Hope for Tomorrow*, and in 2014 and 2015, she and her staff headed to Belize with *International Health Outreach*.

Here in the United States, Dr. Cockley partners with another practice doing a full day of free dentistry for the underprivileged in her community through the *Dentistry from the Heart* program. Her team has also helped with free dental days in Northern Virginia with *Hope for Tomorrow*.

Her outreach has even inspired her patients to serve.

"One of our patients was inspired to go on a mission trip after we went to Vietnam in 2009," Dr. Cockley recounted. "She said that there was a call for international mission volunteers at her church and, while her family tried to dissuade her, our story inspired her and she pushed aside her fears and joined them. It changed her life. We were so touched."

For her team, charitable dentistry has been the ultimate team-building event, bringing everyone together like nothing else. "It's where you get to use your skills to reach people who have no access to dentistry and, at the same time, have a once-in-a-lifetime adventure," Dr. Cockley said. "Even the fundraising events are their own adventure, good team builders and good practice builders. It made us a very tight-knit group,



Dr. Lori Cockley performing mission dental work in Belize, 2015.



Cockley's team in Belize, 2015.

and the stories come up again and again of our adventures riding a rickshaw in Hanoi, zip-lining across the treetops in Belize, climbing the Mayan Pyramids together, listening to the howler monkeys calling out in the trees above us, teaching school children a few English words and how to use a toothbrush in a remote village of southern Vietnam, tossing plantains to the little Belizean spider monkey that would come over to watch us every morning on the patio at breakfast, holding an infant with HIV in a Saigon orphanage, and experiencing some of the most exotic foods and customs."

Dr. Cockley and her team believe the benefits for their service work spread beyond those they directly serve. Their patients are equally as proud of the mission work this dental team from small town Pennsylvania is achieving. "Our patients know what we do and ask us nearly every day where we are going next," Dr. Cockley explained. "The photos of our missions are in photo books in the reception room, on the computer screens and framed on the walls. When we are planning a trip, it takes us many months to raise the money, and we do some really fun and creative fundraising events. We get much positive feedback from our patients and community."