

How many times since graduating from hygiene school have you attended your CE courses and heard about the need for greater public oral health programs in Arizona? I hear it at least once every time I attend an Az dental hygiene conference and 2015 was no exception. Our first speaker, Michelle Gross-Panico, started the conference speaking about the disparities in oral health in the rural areas of Arizona, particularly Greenlee County. She was reaching out to us as licensed hygienists to make a difference in our communities. I had just driven 3 hours from that region and as I looked around, I thought to myself, I am probably the only person here who even knows where that is. As always, I understood the statistics, I grasped that there was a need, but what could I do about it? Yes, I live in a rural, impoverished, underserved community. Yes, I am a licensed registered dental hygienist with 16 years of experience under my belt. But, only dentists can start public dental health programs, right? Plus, where would I get that kind of money to bring public dental care to my community. As Michelle finished her remarks, we learned that Rio Salado had just started teaching a new online program called the Community Dental Health Coordinator. Just like that, I was out of excuses. Everything inside me told me it was my turn to make a difference.

Fast forward 2 years, I have started a 501(c)3 non-profit called Tooth B.U.D.D.S., Bringing Understanding of Dental Disease to Schools. We are staffed by Affiliated Practice Dental Hygienists and provide preventive dental hygiene services free of charge to children at their school location using mobile dental equipment. As Affiliated Practice Dental Hygienists, we are licensed to work without the direct supervision of a dentist. Dr. Stacy Williams, a former hygienist, is our affiliated dentist whom we send referrals for treatment we find beyond our scope of practice. Along with preventive measures, our primary goal is to connect patients with providers. We target students and parents that do not have a dental provider and teach them the value of their mouth in connection with their body and overall health. Roughly 65% of the children we see have active decay and at least 20-30 students per school do not have an established dentist. Very few marketing programs can draw 20-30 new families per month to a dental office, but that is exactly what we are doing for our affiliated dentist.

Not only did the Community Dental Health Coordinator program give me the confidence to step out of my comfort zone of private practice and into the world of public health, I also developed a logistics model based on the assignments from the program. My logistics model has become my base for writing grants and funding Tooth BUDDS. I use the language I learned (ie. medically underserved populations, HPSA scores, etc.) and the statistical data I collected through the help of my professors to write these grants and have raised enough money to fully fund 4 APDH's, 2 assistants and 2 mobile dental units. With those resources we have seen over 600 children in just 2 semesters and are quickly becoming an important spoke in the wheel of public health in our community.

The Arizona Community Foundation was the first to award Tooth BUDDS with a sizeable donation to fund the program. They mentioned how the medical field had always been involved in the community but were excited to see the dental community "finally stepping up". Since then, we have received generous donations from the Delta Dental Foundation of Arizona, United Way of Graham and Greenlee counties, Cenpatico and the ADHA foundation.

Like everything in life, the learning never stops. Mark Smith, juvenile court councilor, pulled me aside one day to thank me for what we were doing for the kids in our community. He said, "if people only knew how many of these young kids I work with in the system got here because of a toothache...". Sixteen years in private practice and I never correlated a toothache to drug addiction. Unfortunately, it

makes perfect sense. If just that little bit of knowledge speaks to you, get your APDH credentials, go through the CDHC program and make a difference in your little corner of the world. No child should have to turn to drugs because of a toothache!

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