



## From Fort Lee to Phnom Penh A Journey of Self-discovery

Jon E. Golub, DMD

Several years ago, my wife, Jamie, who is a pediatric dentist, asked me to join her on a dental mission to Jamaica. As an orthodontist, I wasn't sure what I could contribute. Certainly, I wouldn't be applying my orthodontic training and it had been twenty-five years since I had done fillings and extractions. Knowing that I'd need an arm full of vaccinations and that we'd be taking long bus rides into the mountains, well off the beaten path, I reluctantly agreed. And, so began one of the most rewarding chapters in my dental career.

The timing couldn't have been better for Jamie and me to immerse ourselves in volunteer work. Our oldest son was finishing college while our twin boys were freshmen in college. Our new-found freedom allowed us to participate in two volunteer programs in Jamaica, two in Cambodia and one in Guatemala over the past thirteen months. We also involved our sons, bringing them with us to Guatemala. Our oldest, Mike, assisted in the clinic, while Ben fluoridated teeth and Zach utilized his Spanish to teach proper homecare. Mike has since been accepted to dental school and will begin this fall.

I feel guilty admitting it, but the truth is that (depending on what you're looking for) you get so much more than you give on

these trips. True, many of the sites we visit in Jamaica have no air conditioning, nor any electricity. And the lines of patients who require work seem to stretch on, endlessly, to the horizon. And true, in Cambodia, we rise at 5 AM, hit the road by 6, and work non-stop, taking only short breaks until 4:30 PM. No patients are turned away, and very often it is hard to recognize the anatomy of a tooth through all the decay. But by the end of the day, we all feel good about what we've accomplished and everyone sleeps peacefully that night.

By donating a week here and there, I have learned that often times, *those with so much less, have so much more to teach us.* Working last year in Cambodia at PIO, the People Improvement Organization (<http://peopleimprovement.org/>), a young Cambodian boy took me by the hand to show me his home. We were standing in our make-shift clinic on the fifth floor of the PIO orphanage, with four floors of classrooms below us. The location of this orphanage was significant, in that it was located less than one kilometer from the Phnom Penh dump. Like many others in Cambodia, this boy's family had moved from their poor village to the city to earn a higher wage. However, things didn't work out as planned and the family ended up at

the dump, left to rummage through the garbage looking for recyclables to sell. This boy was lucky, though; his family had remained intact. He had not fallen victim to the wheels of the dump trucks, nor had he been abandoned when food was scarce or worse yet, sold into the sex trade. He was a lucky one, attending a good school and being provided with solid meals. So, standing there on the roof of the orphanage, he pointed proudly at his 100 square foot wood and corrugated tin home, satisfied with his lot in life and oblivious to the garbage and chaos that permeated his neighborhood.

By being willing to travel to remote areas, these missions have allowed me to see 'ordinary' people doing 'extraordinary' things. Take for example, Sheri, who is a mother and a grandmother from Southern California. Volunteerism has always been a part of her life. Last year, while participating as a non-dental volunteer in a remote Cambodian village that lacked electricity, Sheri noticed that the children were unable to complete their homework in their dimly-lit huts. This year, in addition to volunteering for the two week dental mission, Sheri returned to that village with solar-powered flashlights, eager to make a difference in the children's lives.

By understanding that I was committing to something that, for one week, would be more important than my own personal agenda, I have had the opportunity to work with some remarkable people. Noel Brown, DDS, MPH, attended NYU dental school. Upon returning to his native Jamaica, he realized that despite his

own personal effort, many Jamaicans didn't have access to proper dental care, either due to their location or finances. He founded HealthCare International Reachout, Inc. ([www.hcioutreach.com](http://www.hcioutreach.com)). Our Cambodian and Guatemalan missions are run through KIDS, Kids International Dental Services ([www.kidservices.org](http://www.kidservices.org)), whose goal is to provide pro-bono care to impoverished children in developing countries. Working with Bob Renner, DMD, a retired prosthodontist and founder of KIDS, we screened 100 to 400 patients per day (we saw 403 one day in Cambodia). I was amazed at Bob's energy and drive, matched only by those of his wife, Purobi Phillips, co-founder of KIDS, who handles all the logistics of the trips and is dedicated to saving the world, one child at a time. I feel privileged to count them as colleagues and friends.

There are a million excuses to accept our lives as they are: work, family and the inevitable quest to acquire the next object. But luckily for me, a good-hearted and persistent wife helped me stumble upon dental volunteerism. It has become the vehicle upon which Jamie and I now travel the world, and it has helped me define both who I am as a person and as a dentist, as I enter the second half of my career. ○

#### About the Author

*Jon E. Golub, DMD, and Jamie Diament-Golub, DMD, maintain practices in orthodontics and pediatric dentistry, respectively, in Fort Lee, NJ. They are members of Bergen Dental Society. Their most recent trip to Cambodia took place in February, 2013.*

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