



Mobile Dental Unit Takes Exams to Schools

“They were nice,” whispered shy first-grader Kayla Hines, 6, about the University of Texas dental team that fixed the pain on the upper right side of her jaw. “I couldn’t chew anything there,” she explained.

Kayla’s mother, Angela Hines, fled New Orleans with Kayla and her nine-year-old brother just a day before Hurricane Katrina devastated the area. After enduring two months in a small Houston hotel room, the three settled into an apartment that’s within easy walking distance of Landis Elementary in Alief, where both children are enrolled.

The x-rays they took that morning showed that Kayla had a serious infection. She needed that sore tooth pulled. That’s where the UT Dental Mobile Unit—supported by Communities in Schools (CIS) and St. Luke’s Episcopal Health Charities (SLEHC)—met Kayla for the first time.

St. Luke’s Episcopal Health Charities, which celebrated its 10th anniversary earlier this year, has funded CIS since 1997. During its 10 years, The Charities has awarded more than \$66 million to programs throughout 30 counties of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. These programs have touched the lives of 10 million individuals, carrying out the mission of the organization to reach the medically underserved—body, mind and spirit.

CIS is just one of the many health services provided to the underserved that is funded by the Charities, the largest charity in the Houston area devoted solely to health. And the UT dental unit is just one of the many invaluable education-, health- and social-services that CIS provides to the Greater Houston area.

“Our work wouldn’t be possible without the Charities,” Angelica Adams, director of Partnerships for CIS, said. “Because other foundations respect the Charities, we have always found ourselves in a strong position when we ask for additional support. The Charities really seeded our growth.” Kayla is one of approximately 1,200 children seen each year by the mobile unit. It rotates to 15 area schools, spending four days at each school.

“Four days at a time gives us enough time to screen just about all the children in the first or second grade,” said Tony Martinez, CIS health services coordinator, who stays on-site at each school the unit is currently visiting. “Most often, the dental team gives preventive services to children who may have never visited a dentist. At other times, we see crisis dental situations—such as Kayla’s, or such as another recent case of a genetic disorder. When kids need additional intensive dental work, I’ll arrange to meet the parents and kids early at school and we’ll caravan down to the Texas Medical Center for appointments at the UT Dental School.”

Adams chuckles about Tony and his caravan. “Tony is absolutely great at getting the parents involved,” she said. “He used to just refer them to the dental school, but they didn’t always make it down to that huge medical complex. Now, we give parents a parking voucher and Tony leads them



there. That works. And while they are there, some of the parents even learn they can receive dental care—care they would otherwise have likely gone without.”

According to Adams, the mobile unit has been bringing dental care to children at their schools for eight years, and, while it cannot serve as a “dental home” for its young clients, it can head them and their parents in the right direction for ongoing dental health.

“We started out in an old RV, but we lost that unit in 2001’s Tropical Storm Allison,” said Adams. “That didn’t destroy our mission, though. Soon afterwards, UT and the Charities partnered to provide us with this wonderful three-dental-chair unit that suits our purposes perfectly.”

During its early years, the dental outreach program of CIS was primarily in the 3rd Ward of Houston, an East End neighborhood that is medically underserved. Nearly 25 percent of Texans and 32 percent of Houstonians do not have health insurance—and others with some medical coverage may completely lack dental coverage. Houston has the highest rate of uninsured of all major metropolitan areas in the nation.

As more dental services (never enough, of course) began to be delivered to the underserved in Houston’s East End, CIS began looking at other neighborhoods in desperate need of children’s dental care. The Alief area, including Kayla’s Landis Elementary, has been identified as deserving a good deal of current attention. It was included by St. Luke’s Episcopal Health Charities in its Health Neighborhood Initiative, which provides a comprehensive assessment of community needs, involves community members in identifying priorities, and compiles extensive data that communities may use as they develop programs and seek needed funding.

“We scout out an area before including a school in our rotation,” said Martinez. “We check out the level of dental services already in that area. Alief has had dramatic increases in its immigrant population, is home to many Asian- and African-American families, as well as numerous evacuees from Katrina.”

On a typical day, the mobile unit screens and treats about 20 children, said Tracey Godwin, DDS, faculty supervisor from UT Dental School, who works full-time inside the mobile unit. This is her fourth year supervising the program, and she said that “BUSY is an understatement to describe our day.” In close but cozy quarters on the unit, she manages all operations and works closely with Martinez.

“We’re proud of the state-of-the-art facilities in this mobile unit,” said Martinez, pointing to a computer next to a dental chair. “For example, x-rays of the children’s teeth can be viewed immediately. No waiting.”

Martinez has perhaps the most frequent contact with parents and children. He knows Kayla and the whole Hines family, and he demonstrates with his wide smile and compassionate manner that he cares about each one.

ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL HEALTH CHARITIES



“All day long, I get hugs from the kids. And I get thanks all the time from parents who have nowhere else to turn for dental care. So I pass along our thanks to the Charities, because without them we couldn't do this work.”

To learn more about St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities, visit www.slehc.org.