

Ted Siegel is a dentist with heart

Joanna Brown

Hard to believe, but the line was longer at Big Smile Dental than at the nearest florist last Valentine's Day.

That's because Ted Siegel, DDS, had assembled a slew of volunteer dentists, hygienists, assistants, dental and hygiene students, and others to provide free care to anyone who came in Feb. 14. By the end of the hectic 16-hour day, Dentists with Heart had provided \$100,000 worth of X-rays, exams, cleanings, fillings, extractions and pain control to 250 patients.

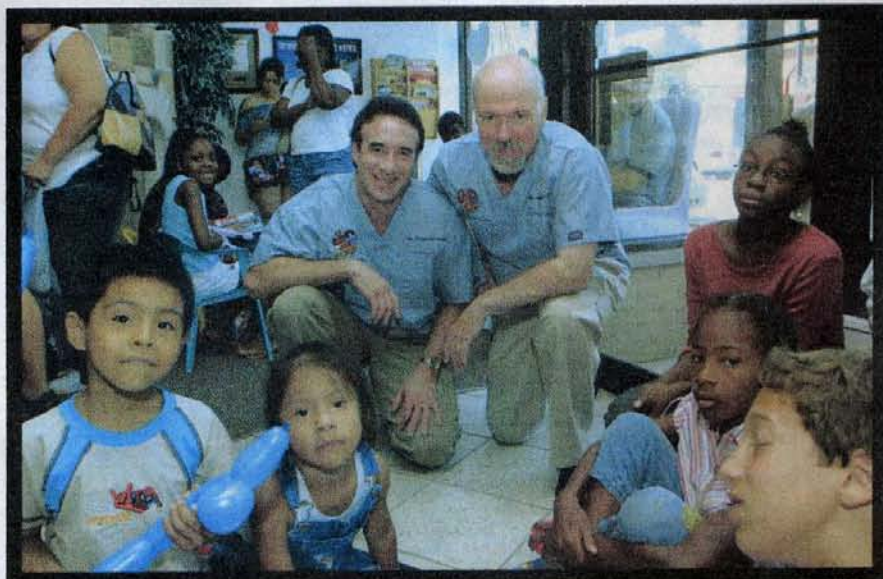
Of course they were exhausted, but everyone agreed before they went home at midnight that they would repeat the program in 2007. Participating dentists included Anu Garg, David Hanson, Gary Hosters, Henry Lotsof and Adri Moyano.

"This is something different," Dr. Siegel said. "This is your hands touching people that need it the most. The hugs and the thank-yous come right from the patients, and it is such a nirvana.

"Once you do it and feel the love, you're in."

The concept of providing dental care as a community service had struck Dr. Siegel long ago, and the plans for such an event were a frequent topic of conversation in the office.

"Other dentists have done similar programs all over the country," Dr. Siegel said. "Writing checks to charity was not gratifying to me. My associates and I had been talking about doing something like this for five years, but there was always something going on that made it the wrong time."



Ted Siegel (center, left) spread the love last Valentine's Day by assembling a team of dentists and staff to treat 250 neighborhood patients for free at his Northwest Side office. Dr. Siegel is pictured with another Dentists with Heart volunteer, Dr. Henry Lotsof, and some of the patients the team treated.

He was inspired to finally take action, however, by a friend who organizes major events for the Special Kids Network. Dr. Siegel knew that if his friend could assemble all-star casts for golf tournaments, he could certainly open the doors of his Northwest Side office.

Dr. Siegel and his staff posted flyers in their neighborhood, advertised through the neighborhood association, and hung signs in their windows on Milwaukee Avenue. And when they arrived at work that cold February morning, Dr. Siegel found a line of people wrapped around the block waiting for him. The first patients had arrived at 3:30 a.m.

Patients had mouths full of teeth rotten to the gumline, painful infections, and roots in need of scaling and planing. Many were fearful because they had never seen a dentist before.

"We put on a show in the back, with rock music blasting and lots of joking around to put the patients at ease," Dr. Siegel said. Patients received the care they needed, and doctors enjoyed providing it.

Within months, however, Dr. Siegel started thinking about the children he excluded from the Valentine's Day event. Statistics on the number of children who have never seen a dentist, he said, were both staggering and inspiring.

"The feelings we had (from the Valentine's Day program) were so good, and we loved what we did so much, we didn't want to wait a full year to do it again," he said. "Through the process

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A similar team of volunteers provided exams, X-rays cleanings and fluoride treatments to children July 31. More than 100 young patients received \$25,000 worth of care.

Dr. Siegel said he will continue the Dentists with Heart program as long as he is able to work; he is also eager to "franchise" the event. He has prepared a free kit for other dentists who want to replicate the Valentine's Day program in their own offices, including letters soliciting donations; digital logos for use on t-shirts, flyers and other materials; and a timeline for putting the event together.

"Once you decide to do it, just get the word out and do it," Dr. Siegel said.