

Dentist's heart wide open

Hundreds flock to his office, where for 1 day, free dental care brings miles of happy smiles

By **Dave Wischnowsky**

Tribune staff reporter

Most days, people can't wait to get out of the dentist's office.

But Tuesday morning at Big Smile Dental on Chicago's Northwest Side, the opposite happened.

People couldn't wait to get in. Beginning at 3:30 a.m., more than 250 people—some from as far away as Wisconsin and Indiana—started showing up outside the clinic at 2833 N. Milwaukee Ave. hoping to take advantage of free dental care.

Many were out of work and most had no dental insurance.

"I got here at 7 o'clock, and people were already lined up to the corner," said Dr. Theodore Siegel, 49, president of Big Smile Dental, who has practiced dentistry in the Logan Square and Avondale communities for more than 20 years.

"They gave me a standing ovation as I walked past them," Siegel said. "I felt like Mick Jagger in concert."

It's not often that a dentist is greeted like a rock star. But on Tuesday, Siegel's patients were



Tribune photo by Heather Stone

Dr. Theodore Siegel (left) and dental assistant Laura Villalobos replace Janice Jenkins' fillings on Tuesday at Big Smile Dental.

quick to give royal treatment to the man who was giving them dental treatment, free of charge.

In honor of Valentine's Day, Siegel organized Big Smile Dental's first Dentists With Heart event. By the end of the day, Siegel and a team of six other dentists from three Chicago clinics were expected to have provided at least \$50,000 worth of cleanings, filling replacements, X-rays and various oral surgeries for about 200 patients.

All without charging a dime. "He should be blessed for this," said Tracy Baylis, 40, of Chicago, who had a wisdom tooth removed.

Like many others at the clinic Tuesday, Baylis said he had no dental insurance, and after being laid off from his job, he was without the means to get treatment for a tooth that had been bothering him for months.

Then he heard about Dentists With Heart.

"Hopefully, more doctors and dentists will provide services for people in their community," Baylis said.

That's Siegel's hope, as well. He envisions dentists throughout the city joining in to make Dentists With Heart an annual citywide event.

dwischnowsky@tribune.com