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Dental health foundation provides free care

By Daniel Jackovino
Staff Writer

Children, ages 2 to 12, from Bloomfield and surrounding communities, had the opportunity Friday, Feb. 5, to receive free dental care at the Give Kids a Smile community oral health fair. Sponsored by the KinderSmile Foundation, the event, which occurs on the first Friday of February, was held for the ninth consecutive year at the Central Presbyterian Church, in Montclair. The American Dental Association has designated February as National Children's Dental Health Month.

But besides providing a free service, the fair gave dental professionals, parents and KinderSmile volunteers the opportunity to keep a trip to the dentist's chair within a child's comfort zone. Live entertainment, goodie bags, and the large, community space where the fair was held, did not hurt either.

Although the Give Kids a Smile Day fair was open to all children, the KinderSmile Foundation, a nonprofit founded in 2007 by Dr. Nicole McGrath, a dentist, provides free dental care to uninsured and underinsured children in New Jersey. It has recently opened its corporate office in Bloomfield, at 2 Broad St., moving from Upper Montclair.

According to McGrath, who was at the Montclair event and at the Bloomfield Civic Showcase in November, a regular dental office providing a wide range of services is being built at 10 Broad St. It is expected to open in August.

Two hundred children were signed up for the free dental clinic last week, but organizers acknowledged the snowstorm cut into that figure. Those who made it were provided bus transportation by KinderSmile, or were walk-ins. The children came from schools and day care centers in Bloomfield, Orange, East Orange, Irvington and Montclair. School nurses had been provided information about the fair by the New Jersey Dental Association.



Photo Courtesy of KinderSmile Foundation

Registered dental hygienist Andrezza Fischer, who works in the Bloomfield office of Dr. Kathleen Gilmore, volunteered at the Give Kids a Smile oral health fair, on Friday, Feb. 5. The event, celebrated on the first Friday in February, which is Children's Dental Health Month, was held for the ninth consecutive year at the Central Presbyterian Church, in Montclair. Two hundred children from nearby communities were signed up for free dental services. Although a snowstorm cut into that figure, the fair was well-attended.

The young patients were given oral examinations, cleanings, fillings, sealants and fluoride treatments. A goodie bag with a toothbrush, toothpaste and a sticker, with a grinning, cartoon animal, was given out.

About 10 dentists had volunteered for the fair, along with five dental hygienists; three assistants; 15 pre-dental school students from Rutgers; and 10 dental students from the New Jersey Institute of Technology.

The fair was also held at the Rutgers school of Dental Medicine, in Newark, and at Mountainside Hospital.

At Mountainside, according to Dr. Mary Voytus, the director of dental residences, Give Kids a Smile has been observed at the hospital for about 10 years. In a telephone interview earlier this week, Voytus said as many as 50 children came to the hospital dental clinic on Friday. Cavities were filled, a baby tooth was extracted and sealant was applied to permanent teeth.

"The children were from 1 year old to 12 years," she said. "The hospital sent fliers to local schools and day care centers. We had people coming in at 8 a.m. They came from Bloomfield, Nutley, Glen Ridge, Belleville, Montclair and Orange. I don't think snow was an issue."

A number of the parents that came in with their children come back year after year, Voytus said. Advice about diet was also a part of the day.

"We advise them not to drink soda," she said. "It's the death of a lot of teeth for children."

In a telephone interview earlier this week, McGrath said the KinderSmile dental center opening in August will have seven dental chairs and provide all services, from newborns to 17-year-olds. But the site will also be an oral education center and have a program to provide free dental work to at-risk pregnant women without insurance. McGrath said, because of funding limitation, right now only 150 women would be accepted.

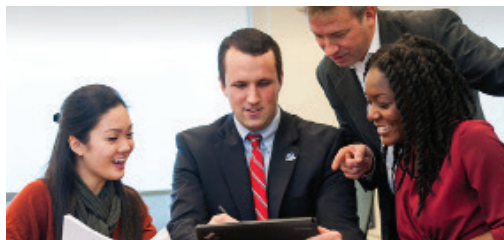
"We want to start with the moms so they can impart this information about oral health to their children," McGrath said. "The newborns will immediately have a dental home. What we're trying to do is attack the perils of oral care in New Jersey, which is the lack of dental access for low-income children."

McGrath said that during the beginning of this coming summer, KinderSmile is going to start getting ready for September.

"We're going to put out a huge sign for a back-to-school checkup," she said. "We're going to get the children on track to have a healthy school year."

KinderSmile, she said, will create a platform for dentists to volunteer their services.

"It's going to be a fun environment," she said. "We want to partner with other organizations to increase oral health awareness and build a healthier community."



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