

'Tooth fairies' go the distance

Miles of Smiles program, with aid of LP pilot, makes critical stop in southeast Inyo County

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A pair of tooth fairies recently got in a little extra flying time.

But these particular tooth fairies did a little more than make a quick, nighttime landing to slip some money under a pillow in exchange for a kid's tooth.

A dentist and dental hygienist came to Inyo County then winged their way through the Death Valley area in a high-flying dash that resembled an episode of the reality show "The Amazing Race."

The flying tooth fairies, with plenty of help from volunteers and pros from local health and human service agencies, ended up giving basic dental exams to elementary school students in Death Valley and Tecopa as part of the Miles of Smiles program.

Dentist Nancy Reifel and dental hygienist Lori Solomon of the UCLA School of Dentistry put in plenty of miles to help 35 kids keep their smiles in good shape.

The pair's epic trek, by air and land, through southeast Inyo County "was heroic dentistry," commented Kathy Peterson of the Inyo First 5 program, which teamed up with the Inyo County Health and Human Services Department and the Inyo County Office of Education to pull off the far-flung dental excursion.

The pay-off came in the form of the smiling faces of the students in Death Valley Elementary School and the Tecopa Francis Elementary School who were able to sink their teeth into the educational presentation about tooth care and then have a dentist give their teeth a good look and provide a sealant, if needed, and offer advice to parents concerning potential dental problems and how to take care of those problems.

"We were just thrilled to be able to offer this service to the elementary school students in Southeast Inyo," said Peterson.

The feeling was mutual.

"Thank you teeth people," was the comment Kassy added to the booklet the Death Valley Elementary School students put together after the visit and gave to Sue Kinney, of the county Office of Education.

Besides the kids, the parents and teachers in southeast Inyo County also appreciated the extra mile the Miles of Smiles program went to get to a part of the county that often feels it gets the short end of the dental floss when it comes to county programs.

"Thank you for remembering that students in small schools have teeth, too. It's special that you care," wrote Grace Mortensen, of Death Valley, in the thank-you booklet.

It took some special effort by a small squad of volunteers and other helpers to deliver the dental operation.

First in line for special mention, according to Henderson, were Reifel and Solomon, the pros from UCLA, which is a partner in the Miles of Smiles program. The two left Los Angeles Sunday night and drove to Lone Pine, arriving at 1:30 a.m.

Then at 5 a.m. they rolled out to the Lone Pine airport and met Steve Ivey, the real star of the show, according to Henderson. Ivey volunteered to fly the tooth fairies into Death Valley in his Cessna four-seater. Peterson and Kinney couldn't say enough about Ivey's generosity, which included not just using his plane and his pilot's skills to make the whole operation work, but also his willingness to take a whole day to accomplish the airborne expedition. Ivey protested that he didn't want much recognition, so Peterson and Kinney said they wanted to make sure he got plenty.

Ivey did make the modest comment that he "was just proud to be part of the team."

While Ivey, Reifel and Solomon were winging their way to Death Valley, Kinney and HHS dental case manager Jessica Klemencic were racing across the desert in a van holding the educational displays that go with the Miles of Smiles program. The two spent the previous night in Beatty, and arrived at Death Valley School, at about 6 a.m., just in time to hook up with the dental pair.

Volunteers from Death Valley National Park had met Ivey's plane and shuttled Reifel and Solomon to the school, where the teachers and students had already helped prepare a space for the program.

Kinney and Klemencic put on the educational portion of the program, which included various colorful booths set up to explain the basics of brushing and flossing. Plus, the children were taught about "snack choices," which involves a discussion of the amount of sugar found in common snacks - from Pop Tarts to chocolate milk - and some more tooth-friendly options, said Kinney.

After getting a "goody bag" filled with floss, a toothbrush and a comic books about dental health (hey, they're kids), 15 youngsters got a dental screening from Reifel and Solomon. Eleven of the kids had a sealant applied to their teeth to battle cavities.

In addition to the screening, Dr. Reifel filled out an evaluation form that was sent to parents. The form notified parents if their child had no cavities and just needed to see a dentist on a regular schedule, or noted if immediate dental care should be scheduled.

Contact is made with parents of children whose screenings showed they needed dental care, which could be anything from simply filling a cavity to "severe dental problems" to immediate need for "emergency dental treatment," said Peterson. Then Klemencic, of HHS, does the follow up and works with the family to find and secure the necessary dental care, she added.

Teachers, parents and the school bus driver all altered their schedules to accommodate the

work, Peterson noted.

Then the air-and-road show hit took off for its next stop. Ivey flew his team to the Shoshone Airport while the van team tore up the highway to get to Tecopa. Again, volunteers ferried the folks from the plane to the Tecopa school, teachers and parents pitched in and the whole operation came together for a second time in a day.

In Tecopa, 20 students were screened and 15 had the sealant applied, Peterson said.

By then, Reifel and Solomon "were pretty wiped out," said Kinney, but had no complaints about their long day. Ivey then loaded up the UCLA pair and flew them back to Lone Pine. (Oh, then they drove back to L.A., that day. Arrgggh.)

Logistics, plane rides and van trips aside, getting the Miles of Smiles program into Southeast Inyo was also quite a maneuver.

The program, which is part of a three-year Oral Health Initiative, was first held in Big Pine and Lone Pine in November of last year.

The oral health program is being funded through a \$300,000 grant from The California Endowment, with Inyo First 5 chipping in another \$22,000 a year, said Peterson.

After seeing the news story in The Inyo Register about that successful effort, members of the Southeast Inyo HHS Advisory Coalition asked HHS Director Jean Dickinson if the Miles of Smiles program could be brought to their elementary schools. That request was made during the quarterly meetings between Dickinson and the group.

Dickinson brought the idea back to the Miles of Smiles team and asked if the challenging chore could be accomplished, said Peterson. A little brainstorming resulted in the combo flying-driving plan to cover all those miles to help with smiles in one day.

"Everyone was very willing to do what needed to be done," Kinney said.

Between volunteers, the schools, Inyo First 5 and HHS, "'Let's make it happen' was the feeling everyone had," said Peterson.

So they went ahead and winged it, literally and figuratively, and added more miles and more smiles to the Miles of Smiles program.

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