

LEAVING THE MATERIAL WORLD

DENTAL HYGIENIST LEARNED A LESSON IN JOY IN VIETNAM

Colleen Kitts

When dental hygienist Pamela Bryson-Weaver came back from Vietnam in November, she changed more than just the colour of her hair. Already a committed volunteer with a number of community organizations, the mother of three children, two of whom have special needs, felt she needed to do more.

Upon returning home, and for the first time in her life, Pamela felt guilty about measuring her happiness by the number of her material possessions. She noticed that these possessions weren't being used and her pride in them diminished.

Her answer was to go through her large, suburban home armed with plastic bags and start filling them. She had her children, seven-year-old Johnny who is autistic, 15-year-old Jenna and 19-year-old Joshua, who has



Pamela performing dental extraction on a patient.



Pamela teaching basic oral hygiene to children.

Tourette Syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, do the same.

In November, Pamela joined the Evangelical Medical Aid Society (EMAS) on one of its regular trips to Vietnam to provide medical and dental care to poor villagers. Doctors, nurses, dentists, ophthalmologists and dental hygienists from across Canada volunteer their time with the society.

Pamela, the only team member from Atlantic Canada, filled a suitcase with dental supplies such as gloves and anesthetics as well as the basics – toothbrushes and toothpaste. She and a team of 25 others landed in Ho Chi Minh City and they hit the ground running. They split into two teams and within the next 14 days would see almost 5,000 patients. Pamela's group spent time in Danang and Hue, then joined the other group in Nha Trang.

The days were long and hot. They worked in what would be perceived as primitive conditions, with no electricity or running water. There were no dental chairs or X-ray machines. The patients sat in lawn chairs in what Pamela described as assembly-line fashion.

Every day hundreds of people lined up to see the doctors and dentists. They waited patiently in line for hours, many of them in a great deal of pain.

"Some of the children were very difficult. I had one little girl who had a cleft palate and she had 11 teeth that needed to be extracted. She'd been sucking on sugar cane. We couldn't figure out why there was so much decay at one village because in the Vietnamese diet they don't eat sugar...."

The EMAS is brought into Vietnam under the auspices of a group of Catholic nuns. For the most part, the group is left alone to see patients and set up donated equipment in the hospitals. Pamela says there were a couple of villages where

they weren't allowed. She was told either that someone political was in the village or there was something going on that they weren't supposed to see.

This trip allowed Pamela the chance to reach out and help others; it served another purpose as well. She experienced her faith in a new and deeply satisfying way. Two priests were on this trip which allowed for daily mass for those who wished to partake. There were prayer times and devotions for those of other denominations. Non-Christians are welcome on these missions, but respect for everyone's beliefs, including those of the villagers they serve, is critical. "We don't go there and preach...we go there and serve. We do what we feel Jesus did."

When Pamela arrived back home in Fredericton a few weeks before Christmas, she felt she had changed in a profound way. She was struck by how very much she and her family have and how much more she wanted to give back to her community, which is interesting considering how much time she was already spending as a volunteer. Pamela is a past president of the Autism Society of New Brunswick, president of Holy Family Parish Council of the Catholic Women's League and president of the New Brunswick Dental Hygiene Association. She works with Birthright International in her community and, along with a friend, runs the Special Olympics program in Fredericton.

Pamela is returning to Vietnam with the EMAS next year. She's already contacted a number of her colleagues in the area who are interested in making the trip with her.

"I think what hit me the most there was that I have a lot. I am a blessed woman. I have a wonderful family, a career I love...I get to travel, I do a lot for my community, I'm very satisfied in a lot of areas." But what Pamela experienced was that the people who had nothing were happy and at peace. She realized that what is important is hope and joy.

Adapted from *The New Brunswick Reader*, January 21, 2006. Pamela Bryson-Weaver will be speaking at the 86th annual national convention on August 14th about autism. †

THAT'S A GOOD IDEA

WHY NOT TRY...

- placing a slip of paper in the pews, or an insert in the church bulletin, inviting all women to belong to the League? The slip can then be completed with the potential member's name and telephone number and placed in the collection basket. Designate one member to retrieve these slips and make that all important welcoming call!

THE LEAGUE IS A PLACE OF LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Margaret Schwab

Saskatoon Diocesan

Spiritual Development Chairperson



On December 27, 2005, friends of Mary MacIsaac, late of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, helped to celebrate her 112th birthday. That was quite a feat! But even more amazing was the fact that Mary had been a League member for 85 years!

In those 85 years, Mary learned many things – one of her greatest joys was to keep on learning. Another joy was to pass that knowledge on and members of Holy Spirit Parish Council were blessed with Mary's eagerness in this regard.

I remember my early days at Holy Spirit, 20 years ago, when Mary would always contribute to the meeting by bringing forth an item from the newspaper for discussion. Often she would report on an informative book that she had read. She once told me that no member should leave a meeting without having learned something.

Mary was quite an inspiration for presidents everywhere. In fact, last fall when Holy Spirit Parish Council met at St. Ann's Community Village (Mary's home), she informed all those present that it was the duty of experienced members to educate new members on what the League is about and what is expected of its members. I must admit, she gave us all something to think about that day!

Mary was the first to admit that her longevity was a gift from God. I think what was truly inspirational is what she had done with that gift. She greeted each day as another opportunity to learn. Throughout her 112 years, that acquired knowledge turned into a gentle wisdom which she graciously shared with those around her. The Lord blessed Mary with a long life and, in turn, she was a great treasure to all who knew her. †