



Bridget Burton, hugs her middle child, 5-year-old Carmelo Morales.

Smiles

AS BIG AS THEIR HEARTS



STORY BY BARBARA DRAKE (MFA '04) | PHOTOS BY AARON DAYE

THEY ENTER THE SUNLIT LOBBY OF THE NCEF PEDIATRIC DENTAL CENTER, in Naples, clutching a parent's hand, suffering from some of the most severe dental problems ever seen. Third-graders who have never held a toothbrush, their jaws aching with pus-filled abscesses. Toddlers with baby teeth rotted down to the gums. Four-year-olds with so much decay, their mouths are pitch black when they open wide to say "ahh."

Most dental providers in Collier County cannot or won't treat these young children. Few accept the Medicaid many of their families rely on, if they have insurance at all. Nor do most pediatric dentists have access to an anesthesiologist to fully sedate children needing many teeth extracted or capped in one sitting. Even if a provider does offer such advanced services, the high cost is nearly always beyond the reach of working families.

But not at the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center. Since opening in late 2008, this world-class facility has provided top-rate, highly affordable care to tens of thousands of at-risk and underprivileged youth from Collier and neighboring counties — transforming children's smiles and wellbeing.

It is all due to a remarkable partnership forged more than a decade ago between the Naples Children & Education Foundation (NCEF) and the UF College of Dentistry, with support from Florida SouthWestern State College, area hospitals and state and local agencies.

Parents, of course, are deeply grateful — like Bridget Burton, a mother of five whose middle child, 5-year-old Carmelo Morales, had rampant

5-year-old Carmelo Morales, who suffered from rampant tooth decay, had eleven crowns put on his teeth at Physicians Regional Medical Center in 2019. Now he can chew properly and no longer cries in his bedroom from pain.



Carmelo Morales, age 5, is cradled by his mother, Bridget Burton, while resident John Tawadrous checks his progress.

tooth decay mainly from eating too many sweets. A patient since 2017, Carmelo bravely underwent general anesthesia at Physicians Regional Medical Center in November 2019 to have seven stainless steel crowns put on his back teeth, plus four white crowns in front. Now he can chew properly and no longer cries in his bedroom from pain, said Bridget.

“I’ve never had the level of care he’s had here, with any of my kids,” said Bridget. “I’ve been taking kids to the dentist for 12 years. “This clinic is a lifesaver.”

Closing the Oral Care Gap

The beautiful seaside town of Naples boasts multimillion-dollar mansions, luxurious yachts and more golf holes per capita than anywhere in the United States. But head inland in Collier County and you encounter low income and impoverished communities, including those of seasonal farmworkers in Immokalee, where families live on \$9,496 to \$24,556 a year, according to U.S. government data.

To address this wide income gap — borne so heavily by the county’s children — local philanthropists founded the Naples Children & Education Foundation in 2000. Supported with proceeds from the high-profile Naples Winter Wine Festival, NCEF has invested more than \$191 million in programs that “significantly improve the physical, emotional and educational lives” of local children, according to its mission statement.

A 2005 Child of Wellbeing study commissioned by NCEF revealed a “catastrophic crisis in oral health” among Collier children. More than a third (17,000) had no access to basic dental care. At one elementary school, nearly 70% of students had untreated decay, and 18% had abscesses, swelling and other problems requiring immediate help.

NCEF PEDIATRIC DENTAL CLINIC

Opened: December 2008

Ages served: birth to 21

Patient visits to date: 145,000

Partners: Naples Children & Education Foundation, UF College of Dentistry, Florida SW State College (Collier Campus), Physicians Regional Medical Center (Collier Blvd.), Lee Health (Golisano Children’s Hospital)

Insurance accepted: Medicaid, Florida KidCare, private insurance

The youngsters’ poor oral health affected nearly every aspect of their lives, explained Lauren Governale (BS ’80, DMD ’85, MPH ’91), director of the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center:

“It wasn’t just that these children weren’t able to eat well, sleep well or even smile; their self-esteem was actually impacted negatively by having severe dental decay.”

To solve these problems, NCEF had to go big — and they did.

The foundation granted more than \$9 million to the UF College of Dentistry, including to build a 20,000-square-foot state-of-the-art dental center and clinic at FSW’s Collier campus, with programs for community outreach and prevention. To treat the most serious cases, the center partnered with Physicians Regional and Lee Health to provide weekly access to operating rooms.

Dr. Governale — a quadruple Gator with four UF degrees — was picked to lead the center prior to its opening in December 2008.

Since then, she has happily put in 15-hour workdays to nurture the clinic into the public-health success story it has become.

“It’s been fun and wonderful and very rewarding,” she said. “We have completed about 145,000 patient visits to date, a couple thousand operating-room cases, and 1,500 IV sedation cases.”

“We even have referrals from pediatric dentists from the community for work that is too extensive [for them],” she added.

School for Smiles

Collier County’s sky-high incidence of childhood tooth decay is due to a tangle of factors.

“Many families have socioeconomic barriers to care — they are uninsured, or they have language barriers,” explained faculty member Kelly Magher (BA ’97, DMD ’02), who noted many clients are Hispanic or Latino.

On top of that, only 9% of Collier County’s 212 dentists accept Medicaid, as compared to 18% of dentists statewide. Even fewer dentists may be actively seeing Medicaid patients, especially young children. As youngsters’ names are added to long waiting lists, small cavities turn into full-blown emergencies.

Feeding the crisis is ignorance of good oral hygiene practices. “With very young children, I will say the main cause [of decay] is the prolonged use of a baby bottle with high-fructose beverages — chocolate milk, juice,” said Susan Gorman, R.D.H., the college’s dental outreach program coordinator.

In the center’s education room, parents — who likely speak Spanish — receive instruction from community health educator Maria Elena Davila, D.D.S., who effortlessly switches between discussions of teeth and dentales.



First-year resident Emily Ross shows 2-year-old Shiloh Travis a fun way to brush with a new bunny toothbrush.

Gorman also oversees the community outreach program, which provides free dental screenings for third-graders in 34 Collier County elementary schools. Fourteen schools participate in a preventative dental-sealant program.

The outreach program also travels to six early learning centers to screen and treat children 6 months to 5 years. From 2017 to 2019, untreated decay among children at the Guadalupe Center, in Immokalee, declined from 48% to 38%; the number of youngsters with urgent dental needs dropped by more than half.

“I don’t think, I know we are definitely making a difference,” said Gorman proudly.



In four minutes flat, first-year dentistry resident Ashley Daniels gives Ashton Jeanbaptiste, a 7-year-old with severe autism, the dental care he needs while staff distract him with a red toy helicopter and encouraging conversation. Highly choreographed procedures like this one have become routine for this skilled team of dedicated professionals.



Nurse Lisa Wright enjoys being the clinic's tooth fairy, comforting nervous patients.

THE "REAL" TOOTH FAIRY

When children from the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center go to nearby Physicians Regional Medical Center for oral surgery, a special friend watches over them.

She gives them a plush toy to hug in the operating room, and when they wake from the ordeal, that plushy is right by their bedside. If the dentist extracted any teeth, their nightstand will also hold a colorful plastic cup with a dollar bill inside.

The person responsible for these acts of kindness is Lisa Wright, a surgical services/operating room nurse at Physicians Regional. But to NCEF patients, she is better known as the Tooth Fairy.

Originally funded with money from her own pocket, Wright's comforting gifts are making it easier for UF dental residents to perform their delicate operations. She has been working her magic since May 2016, two months after she began working at the hospital.

"I saw these frightened children, and we weren't doing anything for them," said Wright, a 30-year veteran of surgical nursing in Michigan. "I just thought, 'Well how can we make their experience more relaxing and more fun?'"

Today, a grant finances Wright's ongoing costs (about \$600 annually). For her overall compassion and professionalism, she was recently honored with an international DAISY Award, given to exceptional nurses who go "above and beyond."

"I want the children not to be afraid of the hospital," said Wright. "I want them to think afterward, 'That was a pretty good place. It wasn't a place you'd want to go to all the time, but it's okay when you need help to feel better.'"

Deisy Morales Gomez, 9, has Down syndrome, which complicates her dental care, explained second-year resident Kristen Dreyer. Children with DS are prone to crowded teeth and often need their parents' help to brush. In addition, children with special needs are often unable to verbalize when they are in pain.



Effectively communicating with special needs patients is a critical skill second-year resident Kristen Dreyer practices at the clinic.

Cream-of-the-Crop Residents

The center's heart is its residency training program, run by the UF College of Dentistry. About 200 applicants compete for five coveted openings each year; when their specialized training is up, it is not unusual for some residents to score in the top 3% of the national pediatric dentistry boards.

Unlike typical residencies, where student doctors may see only two or three patients daily, the center's residents each see up to 24 patients in a day. That experience gives them the edge.

"We learn how to work at 100% capacity," said John Tawadrous, a second-year resident, "doing everything the best way possible, but efficiently."

"You are exposed to challenging things here as a resident," added Dr. Magher, a former resident herself. "After your two years here, you are pretty much prepared to take on any situation."

Rare and Life-Threatening Conditions

"Any situation" can include rare and even life-threatening conditions.

In 2019, mom-of-two Stacia Lynne Wilkin noticed her youngest, 2-year-old Grayson Valdez, fought her every time she tried to brush his teeth. The boy's gums were red and swollen; his teeth near the gum line were yellow. She quickly scheduled an appointment at the center.

Dr. Tawadrous ruled out poor hygiene as the cause of the boy's dental problems; rather, they resembled symptoms of a rare autoimmune disorder,



Marie Jeanbaptiste, at right, said this is the only clinic where her autistic son is relaxed and comfortable.

and he referred the boy to a hematologist.

It turned out Grayson has cyclic neutropenia, which is the inability to produce enough white blood cells to fight off infections; symptoms first show in the mouth, which is normally full of bacteria. Grayson, now 3, is receiving medical treatment for this extremely rare disease and uses special rinses to keep his mouth free of infection.

"Had Dr. Tawadrous not recognized what was going on in my son's mouth, I would have never known to take my son in for bloodwork," says Wilkin. "I am so, so grateful."

Residents also get to work on unusual conditions that, if left untreated, can crumple a child's self-esteem.

On a recent weekday, first-year resident Emily Ross, D.D.S., deftly performed an oral exam on 2-year-old Shiloh Travis, who sat on the lap of her mother, Michele Travis. Dressed to impress in a pink plaid top and metallic-pink cowgirl boots, Shiloh gave a big "ahh" so Dr. Ross could peer inside her tiny mouth.

Watching intently from the sidelines was father Ken Travis. He shares the same genetic tooth disorder (dentinogenesis imperfecta) that causes teeth to be weak and grey, and has mastered how to smile naturally without showing any teeth. But little Shiloh won't have to learn that skill.

In mid-November, second-year resident Lauren Melendez, D.D.S, extracted five abscessed teeth from her gums and put crowns on the rest of her teeth. Now Shiloh has a beautiful white smile. And no more pain.

"You have all these princess crowns on your teeth!" cheered a dental assistant, handing Shiloh a pink and purple toothbrush with a bunny head.

Shiloh's face lit up.

The little girl now collects toy medical kits and plays dentist with Mom and Dad. They say the center's positivity has rubbed off on Shiloh's willingness to take good care of her teeth.

"The staff at the center has been awesome," said Ken. "They continue to be warm and inviting."

Distractions and Extractions

The clinic has also carved a niche for children with special needs.

On a Friday morning in November, Deisy Morales Gomez, 9, flicked back her long dark hair, hopped onto the examination chair and grinned for the camera as mother Maria Gomez stated the obvious: "Deisy likes it here."

Given that Deisy recently had three teeth extracted, two cavities filled and two stainless steel crowns placed, her willingness to cooperate was all the more impressive.

Deisy has Down syndrome, which complicates her dental care, explained second-year resident Kristen Dreyer (BS '13, DMD '18). Children with DS are prone to crowded teeth and often need their parents' help to brush. In addition, children with special needs are often unable to verbalize when they are in pain. Parents must carefully watch for physical and behavioral clues: a child touching their face, for example, or not eating.

The center also offers a drill-free way to stop cavities: silver diamine fluoride. The clear liquid, which turns black on contact, painlessly arrests decay. The unsightly color can be tolerated until the baby tooth falls out or can be filled.

One Thursday morning in November, first-year resident Ashley Daniels demonstrated the product's usefulness with Ashton Jeanbaptiste, a 7-year-old with severe autism.

As helpers distracted Ashton with a toy helicopter, Dr. Daniels swiftly dabbed the liquid onto a decayed tooth. In minutes, Ashton's treatment was over. Mother Marie Jeanbaptiste sighed with relief.

"I am happy to be in the clinic because they are the only ones who can help me with him," she said. "Other places were only able to do X-rays. But here they can do the cleanings and the treatments. They are so kind and nice with him."

"Open Big Like a Lion"

Whether a child is special needs or not, all pediatric dentists face the same challenge: getting their young patients to cooperate.

On a Friday morning in November, 5-year-old Carmelo sat on his mom's lap in the exam room, bawling his eyes out. It had been two weeks since his big operation, and now Dr. Tawadrous was going to fit him with an orthodontic spacer. But Carmelo was having none of it, so the resident announced a change of plans: Just an oral exam today.

"We need cooperation from the patient to fit the spacers, and he's obviously not ready," said Dr. Tawadrous. "I don't want to force it."

"Can you look up for me?" he said to Carmelo, pointing to the ceiling. "Do you brush your teeth at home?"

Carmelo nodded, tears drying on his face.

"Good job. Can you open very big like a lion? Can you stick your tongue out at me? Can you say 'nah nah nah pooh pooh?'"

The child dissolved in giggles. A few minutes later, he was standing calmly in the hallway, marveling at his new Thor sticker. He would return next week for the spacer.

"He came in crying; he left smiling. A successful dentist visit," said Dr. Tawadrous.

"Right, buddy?" he asked Carmelo, holding up his palm.

NCEF, the UF College of Dentistry and thousands of happy patients and their parents would definitely high-five that.