

From the University of Mississippi Medical Center Division of Public Affairs

STUDENTS, FACULTY MEMBERS VOLUNTEER TO GIVE 800 KIDS A SMILE

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JACKSON, Miss. – Some 800 Jackson-area elementary school students went on a field trip to get their teeth cleaned – some for the first time – during Give Kids a Smile day Friday at the University of Mississippi Medical Center.

Jackson Public Schools bused students from Casey, Galloway and Johnson elementary schools to UMMC clinics at the School of Dentistry and the Jackson Medical Mall for free cleanings, fluoride treatments, oral hygiene instruction, cavity exams and more in the dental school's nine clinics.

Supervised by faculty members, scores of future dentists, dental hygienists, dental assistants and nursing services professionals offered their services with the written consent of the children's parents during the local version of national Give Kids a Smile day, sponsored yearly since 2003 by the American Dental Association to deliver dental care to the underserved.

Organized by Marla Martin, director of clinical operations, this is the 12th Give Kids a Smile event for the UMMC dental school, which always invites elementary students from Jackson's public schools, said Dr. Neva Eklund, chair of Pediatric and Public Health Dentistry.

"We try to get students who live in the UMMC neighborhood; we want to make them aware that they need to take care of their teeth, and if they don't have a dentist the Medical Center can be their dentist," Eklund said.

"It also exposes them to career choices, and not just in dentistry, but to others in this setting, where they also meet medical students, nursing students and more. It may get them thinking about their future."

About 1,200 JPS students were invited, but many had to remain at school for state testing, Eklund said.

The parents of many of these JPS students live in the legislative district of state Sen. Hillman Frazier of Jackson, who always observes the event that attracts an average of 700 to 1,000 children each year.

"This is the first time some of these kids get to see, not only a dentist, but any health-care provider," Frazier said. "Some come in here with cavities and other problems that can be identified so they can be put on a treatment plan.

"It also gives me a chance to see the needs of the dental school, its students and faculty. When we make budget decisions in the legislature, I can put a face on the numbers."

One of those faces belongs to Anna Bruce of McComb, a third-year dental student and mother of two.

"I'm already kind of used to looking in kids' mouths," said Bruce, one of about 140 dental students who participated. "I like being around the kids and helping prevent some of their problems. It's a fun day."

Assisting Bruce with a teeth-cleaning was second-year student Will Umphlett of Madison. "This does put a smile on the kids' faces," Umphlett said. "Any time you can give to others, it's an honor."

Dr. Shelley Wilkerson Ellis enjoyed it so much as a UMMC dental student that she traveled from her pediatric dentist practice in Meridian to give a hand.

"I just saw a girl who has an active abscess; it bothers her every day," Ellis said.

"You hope when you find something like this that the parents will act on it. The consent parents gave is only for minor care, although if it's an emergent case we try to contact them right away and ask that they see to it.

"With children especially, you wish you could get it all taken care of in one day."

For Dr. Pia Kirk, Give Kids a Smile Day is different from the service work most dentists do.

"There's more energy in the room when everyone is involved," said Kirk, a family dentist and UMMC associate professor of dentistry.

"When it's a school-wide event, it shows the students that if they work together in their community, they can make a difference."

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