

SMITH ISLAND DENTAL CLINIC: HELPING PRESERVE A COMMUNITY

With Dr. Gael Delany's dedication and Patterson's support, this once-abandoned facility is again serving the small but proud population of independent coastal towns.

It started with a chair.

In 2018, Smith Island, Maryland, had no dental clinic. The community's only practice (staffed by volunteers) had closed 6 years earlier after a winter storm burst its water pipes; it lacked the funds to repair and reopen. To see a dentist, the residents of the island – Maryland's last inhabited offshore island group – had to take a boat to the mainland. The community, whose main source of income is fishing and crabbing, found this arrangement inconvenient and expensive.

Then, in 2019, an effort got under way to revive the clinic and bring local dental services back to the people of Smith Island. That's when Gael Delany, DDS, MSD, got involved. A former member of the US Navy Dental Corps with a background in international dental mission work, he saw the opportunity to undertake a volunteer project in his own state and ran with it.



The Smith Island Dental Clinic, housed in a former library, reopened in 2019 after closing for six years following a winter storm.

He lined up three more volunteer dentists and began the process of upgrading the existing facility to a fully functional two-chair operator.

For that, he needed another chair, as well as a lot of other

equipment. So, he contacted the Patterson Foundation.

FORMING A LASTING PARTNERSHIP

James Ryan, general manager at Patterson Dental's Baltimore branch,

recalled the request coming to him secondhand from a mutual acquaintance who also worked for Patterson. “He said, ‘Hey, James, Dr. Delany is asking me for a chair for a clinic. I think I found one, if you guys will just go get it and store it until Dr. Delany needs it.’ And I said, ‘Sure, absolutely. Let’s go do that.’”

“Not only did they get it for us,” Dr. Delany explained, “but they stored it until we were ready to use it, and then they came down, loaded it on the boat, came over and installed it. That was the beginning. Without Patterson’s help, none of this would have happened.”

Six years later, “this” is the Smith Island Dental Clinic. Housed in a former library and open from March to November, the clinic has its operatory side (complete with two chairs) and a residential side for the two volunteer dentists, Drs. Andrew Cobb and Joseph Rosenwald, who come on two-day missions each month. Assistants from the community help with front-desk, billing, and maintenance tasks. Dr. Delany continues to organize volunteers and fundraising. And the Patterson Foundation remains dedicated to supporting the mission, most recently with an \$18,000 check to compensate the islander staff.

“It’s made such an impact on the island to reopen the clinic,” said Ryan. “I’m just so grateful to be a part of it.”

ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

The Smith Island community is, in fact, three towns – Ewell, Rhodes Point and Tylerton – spread across



Dr. Gael Delany and two graduate residents on their way to the island by boat.

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a small archipelago. Proudly independent, the inhabitants rejected Maryland’s offer to buy the island in 2012 and instead set up a 501(c)(3) organization, Smith Island United, to remain in place and preserve their way of life.

“They are a force,” said Dr. Delany. “They don’t cotton much to outsiders.”

“But when they found out that we were coming to reopen the dental clinic, there was a welcoming committee of about 30 people at the dock,” Ryan recalled.

Before the Smith Island Dental Clinic closed in 2012, it provided very basic services. Now it delivers full-service dentistry in all the dental specialties, including implants. Dr. Delany, an endodontist, had the honor of performing the first root canals on the island. The patient initially asked for his teeth to be extracted, but was eventually convinced that they could be saved and agreed to the root canals.

“The assistant didn’t know what to charge, because they didn’t have that service on file,” Dr. Delany explained. “I said, ‘How about \$200

a tooth?’ So that’s my fee now. We do charge minimal fees for our work, because they don’t take charity.”

SUPPORTING CARE AND COMMUNITY

With such fees, the clinic is clearly a nonprofit enterprise and will remain so. Other organizations, such as the Community Foundation of the Eastern Shore, the Robert I. Schattner Foundation and the Eugene B. Casey Foundation, have contributed grants for equipment, but Patterson has been the largest sponsor to date, providing both equipment and annual grants for volunteer compensation. Dr. Delany recounted how one of the island assistants was reluctant to cash her first check, claiming that the money should be used for the clinic itself. Since then, however, the idea of being compensated for working in the clinic has brought in other islanders to help out.

“The teams that I brought along in the beginning, we’ve been all over the world doing this stuff, so we knew we needed some help,” he said. “We needed some volunteers. But the volunteers had never worked in a dental office, so they didn’t know what it was all about. That’s where Patterson really helped us, by giving us that grant annually to compensate the ‘volunteers.’”

Although the building still needs renovation, the Smith Islanders are justifiably proud of their clinic. “We have a great base of operations,” said Dr. Delany. “It’s not pretty and it’s not perfect, but it’s perfect for them, and they really realize our effort has made a tremendous positive difference in their lives. Just the



The Smith Island Dental Clinic now delivers full-service dentistry to the roughly 200 inhabitants of three towns spread across a small archipelago.

education alone, no longer thinking that extractions are the way to go.”

“There’s a lot of vitality and a lot of gratitude from the islanders that their health is being taken care of again on the island,” Ryan concurred.

MAKING AN ONGOING PROMISE

The future of the clinic is tied to that of the island, and that future is unclear. The community is small – around 200 full-time residents – and the next generation is leaving the waterman culture behind. Changing weather events and rising ocean levels also may have their say in the matter. Nevertheless, Dr. Delany, who is retired from full-time practice, is working on his “succession plan.”

“Graduate residents in endodontics are coming over with me now, as needed,” he said. “The University of Maryland Dental School is going to make us part of their curriculum. And there’ll be other dean’s faculty

members like me coming over to supervise the dentists who don’t have a Maryland license.”

Patterson, too, is planning for the clinic’s future. “Smith Island has taken on a life of its own within Patterson,” said Ryan. “Our plan is to maintain support and be the main support entity for it, even long after I’m gone, because the younger reps and the younger leaders in our branch know about Smith Island. So, we’re going to support the clinic, both through the foundation as long as they need it, and through the dental branch here. And we’ll continue to bring them equipment and upgrades for however long they need.”

If Dr. Delany has anything to do with it, that will be for a long time. “It’s just one of those things,” he concluded. “We made the islanders feel worthy and deserving of such a service.”

“It’s an honor to be a part of it,” Ryan said. ●

