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Oral surgeon plans 25th trip to provide free care overseas

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By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

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He ran for a plane in the snow, traversed treacherous dirt roads in a car with bald tires and spent a lot of time in a room with no running water and ants crawling on the walls.

Photo no longer available

By Theresa Winslow — The Capital

Dr. Edward Zebovitz of Annapolis is about to embark on his 25th overseas mission to provide free operations to children and adults. The oral surgeon's office is located in Bowie.

And as soon Dr. Edward Zebovitz of Annapolis got back from his first trip to the Philippines in 1997, he started making plans for another.

Flash forward 14 years and now he's currently getting ready for his 25th excursion abroad. But it's far from a vacation.

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The 46 year-old oral and maxillofacial surgeon heads to locales such as the Philippines and Nigeria twice a year to provide free care for children and adults. He spends 15 to 17 hours a day for about a week on his feet in bare-bones hospital rooms treating cleft lips and palates and facial deformities.

"I'll do more in one week than a cleft palate center would do in a year," said Zebovitz, who also does volunteer work closer to home. "It feels really good to give and not ask for anything in return. The one purpose is to treat as many (people) as you can."

In less than two weeks, he'll travel to Sorsogon, a province in the Philippines about 12 hours south of Manila. He's leading a group of 24 doctors and nurses mainly from the Annapolis area and the Mid-Atlantic, and they'll spend six days treating patients. The pending mission is the first he's organized himself. The previous trips were sponsored by charitable organizations such as Physicians for Peace and the Bicol Association.

"I'm just thoroughly excited," said Dr. Claudia Hays of Annapolis, an OB-GYN who's part of this month's trip, her first. "It didn't take a whole lot of convincing."

In addition, Zebovitz's wife, Dr. Coryse Brathwaite, an OB/GYN and hospitalist at Anne Arundel Medical Center, will be part of the upcoming mission. It's her third trip, and the couple has four teenage children.

"Here, you worry about the business of medicine," Brathwaite said. "There, you just take care of the people."

Overall, this is seventh time Zebovitz has been to Sorsogon, and his 12th visit to the Philippines. Zebovitz shares stories about his trips with his staff and patients, and they admire his overseas housecalls.

"For me, as a Philippine-American, it's really inspiring to know (what he does)," said Angela Lagdameo, one of his stateside patients. "I think it's exceptional."

Zebovitz has also traveled to Eritrea, Nigeria and the Caribbean.

Zebovitz, whose office is in Bowie, spends \$10,000 to \$15,000 every trip and exhausts himself in the process. But it's not hard to see the reason when he scrolls through pictures on his computer of hundreds of children he's helped over the years. Zebovitz flashes a brilliant white smile as he looks at the pictures, explaining that he's "changed lives in two hours."

Palatable practice

Zebovitz became interested in dentistry when he was a freshman at the University of Maryland in 1982. He spent his Thanksgiving break that year observing a family friend's practice and enjoyed the experience.

He decided to become an oral surgeon because he discovered a love for correcting facial deformities during his training. He went on his first mission after finding out about them from a friend of his father's who went on many trips.

In the beginning, Zebovitz didn't ask too many questions - he was game for a completely new experience.

"Part of it was an adventure; meeting new people and new cultures," he said. "I'm learning a lot as I go. (But you also) get to help people."

He then tells the story of a 12 year-old boy with a severe cleft palate who walked for three days with his father in 2004 for care.

"I think he can walk around in public now," Zebovitz said. "Before, he was just so traumatized."

He attributes his charitable attitude to his parents, who provided foster care for about 20 children and adopted three of them.

Zebovitz said the missions have given him an appreciation for what he has, and have honed his surgical skills. He enjoys going back to a location he's been to before because he can provide some follow-up care, which is not always possible when doctors travel to do charity work.

Miemie van Rooyen, a nurse from Annapolis who is accompanying Zebovitz on this month's trip, and has gone with him once before, summed up his work this way:

"He always says, 'I got lucky,' but not everyone in life with good skills has kind and giving hearts; not everybody is willing to sacrifice their time to help people who really need help," she wrote in an e-mail.

And Zebovitz has no intention of stopping. He's pondering organizing these trips in his retirement. There are new destinations he'd like to visit, including Thailand, Vietnam, India and more stops in Africa.

"All I need is an invitation," he said.