



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LEON KLEMPNER

Klempner's Mission

In places where poverty is a way of life, this orthodontist gives kids a reason to smile **BY ELIZABETH GEHRMAN**

ANYWHERE ELSE, the small, mass-produced staple of suburban home decor—a plaque that reads, “A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was or the kind of car I drove . . . but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child”—might represent just another sentimental platitude ignored by millions. But propped up against a mirror in the Long Island office of orthodontist Leon Klempner, K77, it becomes a living philosophy, as tangible and immediate to the doctor and his staff as the dharma of any Hindu ascetic.

But for Klempner, the path to enlightenment is not through self-denial. He has reached a kind of nirvana by indulging one of his own needs, a need he didn't even know he had until he found its outlet. He's grown hooked on helping others by volunteering his services, donating money and raising funds and awareness for Operation Smile, an organization that brings reconstructive facial

surgery to impoverished children worldwide. He has gone on five missions so far—to Ecuador, Honduras and, most recently, China—working mainly on patients with cleft palate, a birth defect that can have dire consequences if not repaired at an early age.

“First, from a medical standpoint,” Klempner explains, folding his 6-foot, 4½-inch frame into a small office chair in his consulting room, “babies with this problem have a hard time feeding and gaining weight because the food comes up through the nose. Speech is almost impossible. So as these kids get older, nobody can understand them but their parents.

“The medical part is one thing, but the social part is what's devastating,” he continues. “It's impossible to live a normal life.”

As he warms to his topic, Klempner, who seems quiet, almost shy at first, becomes increasingly passionate: “People stop, stare. Parents are embarrassed; children are ostracized, not only from the

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community but sometimes from their own families. In some Third World countries, they view a deformity as the devil's work or something the family did to deserve this. So not only is the child affected, the family's affected. And as a result, the child is often-times locked up at home or hidden away. They come out only at night, wearing hats or collars to cover their faces. They have no education, no way to make a living, no self-esteem, no social life.”

Transforming work

THOUGH OPERATION SMILE IS AVAILABLE TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG adults throughout the United States, its work here more often centers on conditions that are not life-threatening, such as port-wine stains, burns, benign tumors and revision surgeries for cleft lip and cleft palate—operations that insurance companies deem merely cosmetic. In developing nations, however, health care is poor and so are the patients, which means that babies are sent home, and, says Klemmpner, “expected to just live with the deformity.”

“OpSmile” has begun to change that. Founded in 1982 by plastic surgeon William Magee and his wife, Kathleen, a nurse and clinical social worker, the organization has transformed the lives of tens of thousands of people in 20 countries through the work of more than 5,000 volunteers like Leon Klemmpner. Each team—consisting of 10 to 12 plastic surgeons and anesthesiologists, a pediatrician, an orthodontist, a speech therapist, a child-life specialist and about 15 pre- and post-op nurses—spends about two weeks in a host country, seeing dozens of patients during 12- to 14-hour shifts.

Klemmpner, a soft-spoken man whose hazel eyes crinkle when he smiles—which is most of the time—sometimes joins a team in the operating room, doing an extraction or draining an abscess. But

more often, he is called upon to make feeding plates or retainers to enhance the eating or speaking abilities or simply the appearance of patients who never make it to the OR. Infants less than a year old are usually considered too weak for surgery, and younger patients take priority over older ones.

“These missions do a lot of wonderful things that change the lives of a lot of people,” he says. “But the worse part of it is the people we have to turn away, and there's always a few hundred. If that baby has a cold that day, you're going home. Next year that child is older, and every year there's another group of babies born, so the chance gets less and less that he'll have the surgery. And when you see a mother looking at you with all her hopes and aspirations, and you have to turn her away, it's devastating.”

A moment to cheer

STILL, THE SUCCESSES OUTWEIGH THE DEFEATS. AS HE PREPARES to meet his first Port Jefferson, N.Y., patient of the day, a nervous 12-year-old named Timothy who is having braces installed, Klemmpner talks about the youngest child he ever worked on.

“A 28-day-old baby who weighed about five pounds with a wet diaper,” he says. “I didn't have a tray small enough to make an impression. So I made the baby a little feeding plate from a plastic teaspoon. As soon as I put it in her mouth, you could hear the sucking. The reflex was there, but there was nothing to suck against. The mother broke into tears. We all cheered. We had a crowd around us at the time, because you never know how the baby's going to react. That baby was primed and ready to roll.”

Klemmpner's entire practice is testimony to his dedication, not only to his chosen cause, but to children in general. The first thing you notice when you walk through the door is that much of the wall space is adorned with Mets and Yankees sweatshirts, T-shirts, caps and pennants. It's all raffled off, with proceeds going to OpSmile, on the day of the big game—the game, that is, to which Klemmpner treats 300 of his closest friends: Patients and staff members and their families.

Photographs of Operation Smile children also occupy plenty of prime real estate. “When we first put the pictures up,” says long-time practice development coordinator Mary Ellen Harsch, “the kids would want to know, ‘What is that? It's so ugly.’ But now they come in, and they'll explain it to other kids. It's really cool to watch how they're learning that they don't have to be afraid of someone who's different.”

Over a vegetarian lunch at a nearby cafe, Klemmpner discusses the importance of raising the awareness of the next generation. When he delivered the keynote speech at his daughter's sixth-grade graduation, he told the kids to look around the room at one other. “‘What you're looking at,’” he told them, “‘is lottery winners.’ What they had won was that they had normal-looking faces and that they were born here in the United States. And that's just by the stroke of luck. ‘You could've been one of those kids born in the malaria-ridden jungles,’ I said, ‘with nothing but a rag on your back



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and parents who are working on a plantation.'"

It's clear that Klempler, adjunct lecturer in orthodontics, is quite aware of his own good fortune. After growing up in Queens and marrying his high school sweetheart, now a nurse practitioner, he attended dental school in Maryland and then went to Tufts to learn his specialty. He chose to open his practice in Port Jefferson, N.Y., because he and his wife wanted to raise their children—they have three girls—away from the city, and saw Long Island as an expanding area with lots of young families. Though he had volunteered before as a counselor for a teen suicide hotline, nothing in suburban New York had prepared him for the conditions he encountered on his overseas missions.

"I have to admit I was shocked," he says. "You see little kids playing in filthy areas of malaria and typhoid. No shoes, no socks. No electricity, no running water. It's definitely unsettling. When you first get home, you're burned out, spent, exhausted. You don't want to think about going on another mission."

This statement, by the way, utterly contradicts the assertions of his staff. "He gets really kind of a high off of it," said Eva Lintz, his head clinical assistant. "He comes back renewed almost."

Harsch agreed. "He is so hyped up," she said. "He feels very good, excited about what he's done and excited to share any positive message he can. All his creative juices are flowing, and he's thinking of more ways to help the Operation Smile people. He's at the forefront of his energy."

It doesn't take long, Klempler admits, for the addiction to return. "You have a need to go after awhile," he says. "It's a reality check for me. Because no matter how grateful I am for everything I have, when you go to a Third World country, the little things that used to bother you? They don't mean anything anymore. I think that's one of the reasons I like going back. It keeps grounding me."

The images of poverty he has seen in these countries, he adds, will stay with him a lifetime. But so will the smiles of the people he has helped: "They just can't stop looking at themselves in the mirror."

Klempler speaks little Spanish and no Chinese. Though there are translators on hand at every OpSmile site, he says, the going isn't always easy. "You're a kid who has nothing, poor, and with a facial deformity. You don't really know what that is, and then a whole bunch of strangers comes from another country and wants to take you into an operating room. That's scary."

Still, "no matter where you go, a kid is a kid. If you come to them with love and respect, they give it right back to you."

He and his staff approach their Long Island patients with the same attitude. After lunch, the appointments become shorter and the office more filled with children until it takes on the air of an after-school program with your favorite science teacher.

There are toys in the reception room, but most patients head straight for the exam room, where the two dental chairs Klempler shuttles between seem almost incidental to the kid-height cityscape mural with a Nerf basketball hoop in front of it. Moms and dads



Leon Klempler says the poverty he has seen will stay with him a lifetime. But so, too, will the smiles of the children he has helped.


fill out "brag sheets" for the biannual newsletter, and Klempler's staff helps the kids sign up for the raffles, games and contests—many of which raise funds for OpSmile—that are held almost continuously. There's so much fun stuff going on here that you'd almost think it would make kids *like* coming to the orthodontist.

Kids, for instance, like 13-year-old Evan Pierro, a multiply handicapped young man who bounds into the room jumping up and down, squealing with delight, hugging and kissing "Dr. Leon" and his staff.

According to Harsch, when Evan first came here, he "couldn't be touched, couldn't see any instruments, couldn't sit in the chair for 10 seconds." Klempler put his braces on one at a time over a series of months.

"There weren't too many orthodontists willing to stick it out," says Evan's mom, Nadine, noting that two other dentists already had given up on Evan. "My hopes were low. But the whole setup here is so friendly. They're willing to embrace him and create a family relationship. How many places are willing to do that?"

Harsch is convinced not only that Klempler's nurturing side makes him a perfect volunteer for Operation Smile, but that his work with the organization in turn feeds his spirit.

"I mean, how could you not feel good about yourself when you've done something like that?" she asks. "How could that not mend any ailments you have in your heart?" 

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