

An Inside Look: See how Dr. Kari Cunningham got her start

By Jackie Best

Dr. Kari Cunningham, a pediatric dentist from Cleveland, has been able to combine her passion for giving back to the community with her career in dentistry.

Cunningham is a recipient of the National Health Service Corps Scholarship, which requires a commitment to four years of service to an underserved community upon graduating from dental school. She now works at Northeast Ohio Neighborhood Health Services Inc. (NEON) in Cleveland, where she can fulfill her commitment and give back to her community at the same time.

“For new dentists or right after school, it’s a fantastic way to jump start your career,” Cunningham said. Not only are there financial benefits to the loan repayment program, but it’s a great way to gain experience, learn about a culture of individuals and learn how to troubleshoot problems in a different setting than dental school, she said.

Cunningham received her bachelor’s degree from the University of Pittsburgh and went on to receive her D.M.D. from the Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine in 2010. She was able to defer her service commitment until 2012, when she received her Certificate in Pediatric Dentistry from the Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine and Rainbow Babies and Children’s Hospital.

After graduating from dental school, Cunningham said one of the biggest challenges she has faced is “the realization that there is so much more dental disease out there and the increased need for oral health education among people in the community that I treat.”

Cunningham grew up in Cleveland, and she said being able to give back to the same community she grew up in and influence families in her community gives her a sense of pride. She said from a health care standpoint, she is better able to understand her patients’ circumstances.

“Although I recognize there is need everywhere, I find I may have a greater impact because of my experiences in serving those in my backyard, who are here with me,” she said. “We’re all facing this together. I’m immersed in the community that I’m treating.”

Cunningham said one of the biggest lessons she has learned so far is that she can’t save everyone.

“The reality of it is the best I’m able to do is to educate and strongly encourage patients to seek the care they need,” she said.

She said because she is treating patients in a lower socioeconomic status, sometimes dental care is not their top priority because they are concerned with problems like how they are going to keep their lights on or keep a roof over their head. She said she had to realize that when a patient doesn’t return for follow-up appointments, it’s not a reflection of her, but a reflection of reality and that patient’s situation.

“I do my best to address the worst dental disease first, and strongly encourage them to come back,” she said.

Cunningham said loan repayment programs and scholarship programs like the one she is participating in are a fantastic way to serve the community, and it has been particularly great for her because she has always had a passion for giving back to the community.

“To be able to walk away and know you made a difference in at least one person’s life, to know that someone got the concept to go to the dentist and be proactive and not reactive, and you’ve converted someone to wanting to go in, then you’ve really done your job,” she said.

She said her favorite part of her job is being able to provide a positive first dental experience for children, and seeing them walk out of the office excited to come back.

Cunningham said she first became interested in dentistry when she was 12 and decided to stop sucking her thumb while she saw her sister go through braces. She said she was satisfied with her smile, which sparked an initial interest in dentistry for her.

After discussing the situation with her father, she found out that he had been trained as a dental assistant while serving in the Air Force, and he encouraged her to become a dentist. She said throughout high school and college, she had several mentors and connections that helped to solidify her pursuit of dental education.

In 2004 while at the University of Pittsburgh, Cunningham participated in the Semester at Sea program where she had the opportunity to travel to several foreign countries. She said she witnessed the disparities in oral health care access and utilization by observing the smiles of people she met. She said seeing this helped her realize she wanted to focus her career on helping the community and the underserved rather than on orthodontics.

“I wondered how I could straighten teeth when there are communities and people lacking education and resources needed to maintain a healthy smile,” she said.

She said she modified her focus even further after participating in the Case Western Reserve University School of Dental Medicine’s Healthy Smiles Sealant program and decided she wanted to provide dental care to pediatric patients in her community.

While she was in South Africa, one of the tour guides said, “When someone in our community ‘makes it,’ they don’t go off to better themselves. They stick around and reinvest in their community so that someone else can have a chance to succeed.”

She said she has kept those words close to her heart, and she is very pleased that she has been able to treat patients in Cleveland and give back to her own community.

“I am blessed to be in a position where I can pay it forward by giving back,” she said.

Reprinted with permission from the Ohio Dental Association.