

Dentist traveling to Ecuador to help poor children smile

By THERESA WINSLOW, Staff Writer

The first time she saw their teeth, Dr. Fedra Witting was heartbroken.

The Annapolis dentist already knew she'd be busy on a volunteer trip to Ecuador, but when she saw all the decay - and worse - she knew she'd have to kick it up a notch.

"Ninety-nine percent of the children we saw there had never seen a dentist before," she said. "There were dental abscesses and decay everywhere. You want to fix them. You want to get rid of the pain."

So, Dr. Witting worked through lunches, skipped bathroom breaks, and tried to treat as many children as humanly possible in the time she was there last year. The small group of dentists, dental assistants, hygienists and an orthodontist Dr. Witting was with helped about 1,000 children in 10 days.

"Most people have more than one gear," she said. "So, for me it was like shifting into fifth. They were so sweet, so polite, such good kids."

When she left South America for home and her own family, she was exhausted, but also determined to return and do even more.

"I personally believe a lot of people nowadays are afraid of going overseas and going to countries they're unfamiliar with. But I've traveled all over the world and have been treated very nicely. I think it's really important for people overseas to see the good side of Americans."

She'll get that chance next month when she heads back to Ecuador, to the southern city of Guayaquil, as part of a team of dentists, dental assistants and doctors with a Cockeysville-based nonprofit organization called Ecuadent. The group works out of a military base there.

"She loves children and she's a very compassionate and very hard-working (dentist)," said Ecuadent founder and executive director Tammy Fesche.

Dr. Witting is among 42 volunteers headed to Ecuador Feb. 9-18 to treat orphans and street children, Ms. Fesche said. She was last there with Ecuadent in September.

In the weeks before she leaves, Dr. Witting is gathering as many donations of toys, stuffed animals, clothes, crayons and markers as possible from people who stop by her practice. She's also trying to learn Spanish while juggling office and parenting responsibilities. Dr. Witting, 37, has two girls, 8 and 10.

"This is the only dental treatment (some of the Ecuadorean children) get," she said, explaining why she volunteers despite a busy schedule. "So if there's one less doctor, there are a lot less people seen."

Spirit of giving

No one who knows Dr. Witting was the least bit surprised she volunteered to go to Ecuador and that she wanted to return. "She's a very kindhearted person and one who's interested in new and

different experiences," said her husband, Dr. Michael Witting, an emergency room physician.

"She's just a giving, caring person," said Joyce Boucher, the office manager for Dr. Witting's dental practice. "She'd just talk about the children and smile."

Dr. Witting's journey to Ecuador started when she was researching volunteer opportunities. With her education completed and her practice settled, she said she wanted to make a difference in the world. Originally, she was considering work in Vietnam, but when she discovered Ecuadent, she decided to opt for that country. She's still considering a trip to Vietnam, though.

The dental care she provides in Ecuador is free, and Dr. Witting pays her own way there.

In the fall, she was accompanied by her dental assistant, Angela Greenway of Severna Park. Ms. Greenway is currently taking a continuing education class, so she can't go back next month, but if Dr. Witting returns a third time, her assistant plans to be at her side.

"It was the experience of a lifetime," Ms. Greenway said. "It changes your whole aspect. (Dr. Witting) is a sweet, caring person and when you work in that environment it grows on you."

Anyone interested in making donations for the Ecuadoran children should call 410-841-5400. For details on Ecuadent, go to www.ecuadent.org, or call 410-561-1800.