

Dr. Clyde Larson, CEU Alumni - A flicker of hope

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Dr. Larsen and other dentists visit the children at the We Can Smile Again Rescue House

Writer's note: I'd given up on asking Dr. Clyde Larsen (CEU alumni 1966, and past Alumni Association president) if I could write about his service adventures to places most of us haven't heard of. His firm "no," came with a follow up that he absolutely did not want the recognition. It just wasn't a possibility- ever. Then one day, he sent a text, "I'll cooperate...it might help someone in their life learn the benefits given from God to those that lose their life in service to others..."

To feel the poignance of Clyde Larsen's joy, one must understand the depths of his sorrow. He was alone, distraught and uncharacteristically lost. His wife, Sheila, passed from liver disease (nonalcoholic cirrhosis). They'd only known about her illness for four short months and Clyde's world came crashing down. Just before the diagnosis, Sheila and Clyde were having the time of their lives serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints at the Delemar Valley Cattle Ranch in Hiko, Nevada.

The day they came home from their mission, they drove into the driveway of their house just outside Price, and Sheila couldn't get out of the car, so Clyde carried her in. Thus began hundreds of trips to doctors and hospitals.

In Sheila's typical humor, she quipped that she was, "not going to be some doctor's science fair project." She lived true to her decree and passed just hours before getting a liver transplant on Dec. 20, 2014.

A Flicker of Hope

Caught in a whirlwind of heartache, Clyde needed to find his place in the world. Retired from his dental practice, grieving and wondering where he fit, "I had a choice, I could sit home and be bitter, draw into myself and say, 'why did this happen to me?' I chose to serve God's children around the world and he has healed my broken heart."

Clyde began looking for opportunities to serve others. One day he received a phone call from Dr. Wayne Chisolm, asking if he was ready to serve another mission for the LDS church doing dentistry work. Clyde wished that he could go, but church policy calls for retired couples to serve missions, not single men.

There were other complications preventing Clyde from going to Samoa...his hands weren't working well and he had limited vision in his right eye (a horse bucked him off- he suffered a concussion and blindness... but that is another story). He told Chisolm that he was, "washed up, but if you get in a bind, call and I'll try to fill in." Chisolm felt in his heart that Clyde should go to Samoa so he worked it out so Clyde could work three months not as a missionary, but as a volunteer dentist at the dental clinic run by the LDS Church.

A Moment of Terror

Working on his first patient, fear shot through Clyde's hands and down his spine. He sat frozen holding a syringe over his patient's mouth. His worries that he was "washed up" as a dentist felt like a reality. "It was more stressful than when I gave my first injection back in dental school," he said. He gripped the syringe, said a prayer and pressed forward. After a just a few patients, a miracle started to happen.

"My hands worked phenomenally well, I could remove teeth that I couldn't have removed when I was in private practice. I could do restoration work on teeth faster and better than ever before. My fingers got their dexterity back," he said.

Clyde felt a deep affection for the people, a tenderness. They called him "Coconut Clyde," the white Samoan. "I

didn't look at them as someone different from me, I looked at them as someone I love," he said.

An Addiction

While in Samoa, Clyde received a text asking if he wanted to volunteer at the LDS Church's high school on Tarawa, the capital of Kiribati, a group of atolls (islands made of coral) in the Pacific Ocean.

Even though there were immense highs on his trip to Samoa, there were also many difficulties. Clyde asked himself, "Do I want to do this again?" His cell phone wasn't working, so he borrowed another dentist's phone to answer the text, "yes."

After volunteering in Tarawa, Clyde knew he wanted to continue serving on dentistry trips for as long as he could. Today, he has been on eight trips - and is planning more. He hopes others will be inspired to find ways to serve, "Not everyone can fix teeth around the world, but everyone can do something to make life better for someone else - especially their family and the people closest to them."

Goat Fat in Mongolia

Years before he started going on volunteer dental trips, Clyde had a feeling he would go to Mongolia someday. After the trip to Tarawa, Clyde couldn't get Mongolia out of his mind, so he called the Academy of LDS Dentists and asked if they had any opportunities for service there.

Wendy Whittle replied that she had just received a request for American dentists to serve in Mongolia. Mongolian LDS Charities and Alan Maynes (a Price native and past Church Educational System director who was serving an LDS mission in Mongolia) worked out the logistics, and the city of Choibalsan invited Clyde to come to work on children's teeth in the elementary schools as well as visit the dental students.

Dr. Duane Orchard agreed to come to Mongolia with Clyde. Making their way through customs was a nightmare. Somehow, Clyde and Orchard made it into the country with their dental supplies. They worked on children for six weeks. In Mongolia dentists do not use anesthesia on baby teeth. Carefully, the two dentists fixed hundreds of Mongolian student's cavities. The tots sat quietly, without numbing shots. Mongolians eat a sugary diet (thanks to Russians bringing them sugar and vodka), and do not brush their teeth. Dental clinics are so busy, that people can't get appointments. Clyde traveled to

primary schools and spread his message, "You don't have to floss all of your teeth, just the ones that you want to keep," in hopes of preventing future cavities.

While in Mongolia, Clyde learned that he can eat pretty much anything. Mongolians invited him over for traditional meals of goat meat, skin and fat. They are so poor, Clyde could not refuse the humble gifts. Clyde made a second trip to Mongolia in 2018 to reunite with friends from his first trip, and work on the mayor's goal to have every elementary student be cavity free.

Uganda

In 2016, Dr. Drew Cahoon was looking for another dentist to go on a trip to Uganda. Clyde readily agreed to the six-week trip. In Masaka, Uganda, a beautiful lady came in to the dental clinic with rotted teeth. She would not smile because she was embarrassed. Clyde overheard one of the other dentists, Dr. Eroni, say that she wished she could fix the woman's smile. Clyde ran to catch the patron as she was leaving and said, "you come tomorrow, and I will give you a pretty smile." The visits continued. Each time the woman arrived dressed in her best dress, patiently waiting all day long for Clyde to work on her teeth. He made her six-upper-front teeth. When Clyde finished, she smiled a genuine smile of a woman who feels beautiful.

"I learned that every woman, no matter her culture, shines when she feels beautiful and they feel prettier when they have white-front teeth," he said. African dentists know how to remove teeth amazingly fast. Clyde learned from their techniques - improving his practice.

While in Africa, Clyde and his daughter, Catherine Larsen (CEU Alumni 1995), visited an orphanage housing 19 children. When the dental work unexpectedly ended early, he decided to stay at the orphanage eight days. At first Robert, manager of the orphanage, tried to give Clyde better food than the kids were eating - he protested, arguing that he was one of the family.

"I ate with them every day. They had little to eat: a small bowl of porridge for breakfast and a small bowl of rice or noodles for dinner... that was it," he said.

Playing with the kids every night, Clyde grew to love them as his own. "I was the oldest orphan there and I learned to love them with all my heart." The children call him "Papa" and they continue to stay in contact.

Remote Atolls

On his previous trip to the atoll, Tarawa, Clyde traveled two-hours by boat to visit another atoll: Abaiang. There, the people live without power or running water in grass huts. There is not a dentist on the island and most people don't have cash to pay for the \$100 boat ride to Tarawa. Clyde decided that he would make a return trip to work at Abaiang.

There were desperate needs because most people had never visited a dentist. Clyde brought a generator, a portable chair and everything he needed. He worked without an assistant and sterilized his tools in a rice cooker with Clorox water. He spent 11 days working the hardest he has worked in his life. Many people needed 5-8 teeth removed. Running low on anesthetic, miraculously, Clyde was able to numb patients mouths using less anesthetic than usual.

Eating in the morning and night, Clyde lived off coconut juice, boiled rain water and raw tuna. Sleep came after long days of work, in a little grass hut on the ocean. The temperatures were a humid 86 degrees Fahrenheit during the day and 82 at night. One evening, Clyde brought a coconut home with him for the next morning's breakfast and set it just outside his mosquito net before going to sleep. He was too tired to awaken when he heard scratching sounds during the night. In the morning he saw the source of the rasping sounds, a foot-long rat that had been eating his coconut all night long.

"I gave everything I had to Abaiang," he said. He removed over 800 teeth, restored 350 surfaces (filled cavities, etc.), gave 600-fluoride treatments and taught oral hygiene lessons to 600 people with the help of the full-time LDS missionaries in the area. When he stepped on the boat to return to Tarawa, he was completely exhausted.

"It was definitely not me. I received immense strength, knowledge and ability from on high," he added.

Without the Dental Tools

Clyde's daughter, Catherine, helped with his travels, including flying with him at times and sharing her air miles to pay for some of the flights. She is the vice president of Service at 4Life, a world-wide supplement business headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. On the most recent trip, Clyde helped Catherine's group build four houses for people in Bogota, Colombia, to replace their shanty, tin-covered shelters.

"Of all of the things I've done, the best spirit I've found was fabricating those houses. Everyone there working on the houses sacrificed something. There were no ill feelings or harsh words. Everyone cared for someone else more than themselves," he added.

The 15-foot-square houses are constructed out of precast cement slabs, epoxy and recycled plastic. The foundations are a cement pad poured on the steep mountainsides. Because the ground is dramatically sloped, there is not enough flat ground to create 15 feet of space. Ingeniously, the foundations are poured partly on ground and the other part spans out into the air, supported by pillars connecting to the slope below.

There was an energy present as volunteers worked together. They talked about how they felt, and before leaving, volunteers committed to come back and personally fund six more houses.

Greatest Lesson

More trips are in the works for Clyde, his undaunted desire to serve is growing. "There are opportunities to serve everywhere, I see friends serving in Price just as powerfully," he said.

Working on people who live in balmy grass huts, cold yurts, cement houses, who are atheists, Buddhists, Christians, white, brown or yellow, Clyde learned one powerful lesson, "It is amazing how much you can love people and they love you back. It is a miracle."

~ Renee Banasky