

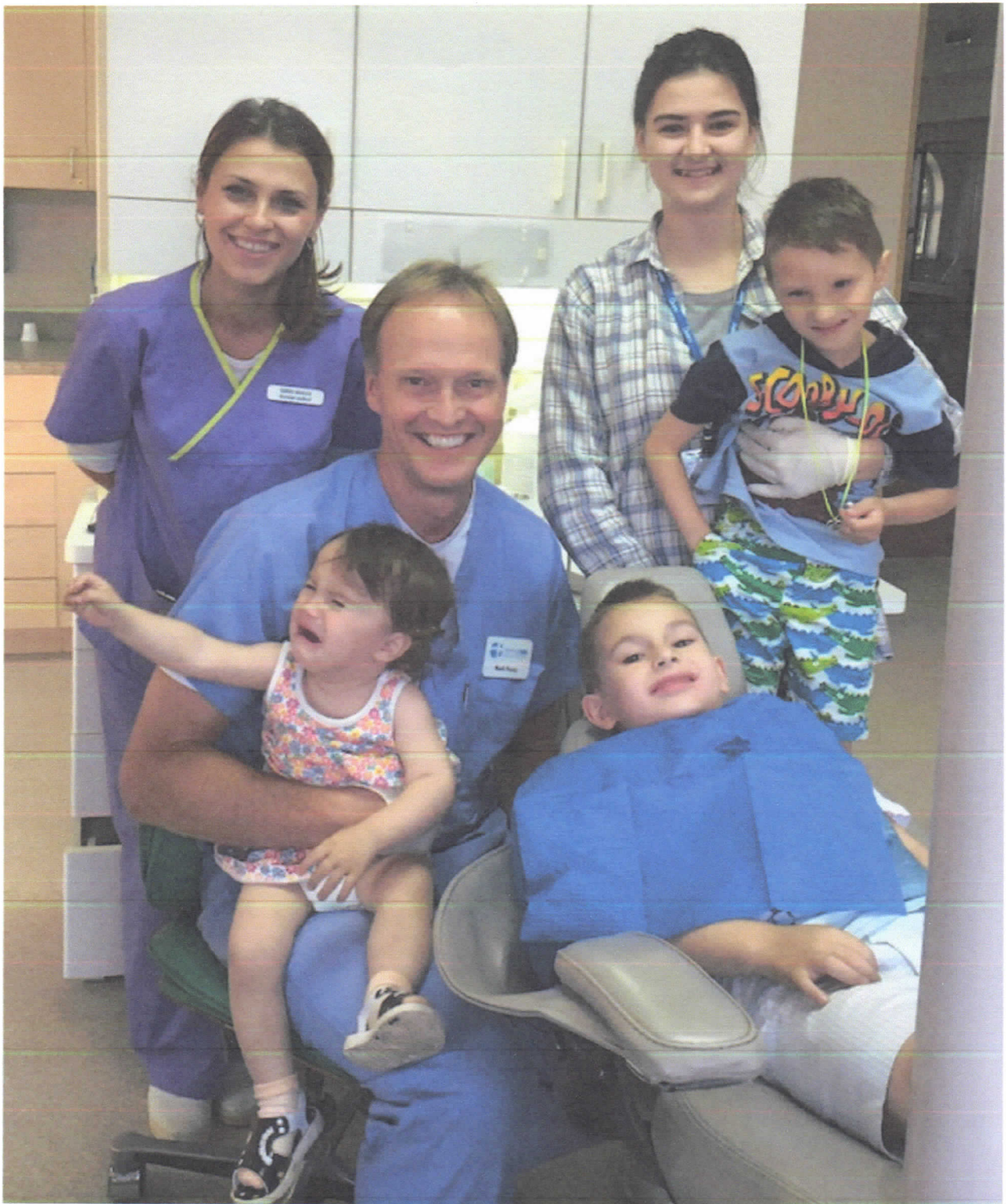
How to help

‘Be in the game’

For Richardson dentist, mission trips have been life-changing
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Ken Ord (left) and Mark Denny have run 10 marathons together. They meet at 5:30 a.m. several times a week to run. “To Mark, a long run can cure anything,” Ord says. (Stewart F. House/Special Contributor)



Richardson dentist Mark Denny, with patients and medical workers during a trip to Romania, is passionate about providing dental care to people in need on mission trips and closer to home. (Mark Denny)

By **LESLIE BARKER**
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Throughout his childhood, Mark Denny would awaken to the steady pounding of his father's sneakered feet hitting the floor. Left foot, right foot, left, right, left, right. His dad had asthma and couldn't run outdoors, so every morning, he'd run in place.

The rhythm of those predawn sneakers continues to carry Denny.

"I grew up with that discipline," Denny said. "He also taught me to be kind and to care about people."

For the Richardson dentist, discipline manifests itself in determination. An avid runner, he's completed 100 marathons, including his 10th Boston Marathon last month. His sixth was the year of the Boston Marathon bombing.

He has finished 50-mile races, run the Grand Canyon rim-to-rim on more than one occasion and run through breathtaking scenery around the world.

"To Mark, the colder, hotter or wetter the weather the better," Ken Ord said. In their 25 years of friendship, they've run 10 marathons together, meeting at 5:30 a.m. several times a week to run. "To Mark, a long run can cure anything — a cold, flu, fever, broken ribs, separated shoulders, even a bad knee."

They talk, they laugh, they share milestones of joy and of sorrow.

"When you run early in the morning with someone on the day you bury your parents," Ord said, "you create a unique bond."

Such kindness and caring carry over to Denny's other passion: bringing dental care to people around the world through mission trips, as well as to people close to home.

On the Amazon

In 1990, Denny was five years into his dental practice and his wife, Kathleen, was pregnant with the third of their three daughters. But when he heard through his church, Prestonwood Baptist, about an expedition to a remote Brazilian village reachable only via the Amazon River, he felt compelled to go.

"We slept in hammocks on the boats," he said. "During the day, I sat under a tree in the middle of nowhere and people lined up for dental work. What really got to me was a guy who had canoed 10 hours through the night to get to where we were and have his tooth pulled.

“The experience changed my life. It rearranged my whole thought process.”

Fellow church member Johnson Ellis, who organized and led the trip through the nonprofit Amazon Mission Organization (AMOR), called Denny “humble, authentic, capable and kind. It is almost impossible to convey what a difference he made. With the aggressively decayed teeth many people had, his efforts were life-transforming.”

In the years that followed, Denny has continued to go on mission trips to Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and Romania. Each of his daughters accompanied him at least once.

“I wanted them to see what I do,” he said. “I wanted them to see what the world is like outside Richardson, Texas. I wanted them to eat weird food. They’d hold the hand of the kids whose teeth I was pulling. They slept in hammocks. It affected all three in a big way. I know it shaped them.”

Each trip has shaped him as well, he said. “Without question, this has made me more serious about my faith. God shows humility to me through this.”

In 1997, Denny was part of ServingHIM Healthcare International Ministries’ first mission trip to Romania. That first year, only 12 medical professionals went, seeing patients every day from 8 a.m. till 2 a.m.

“It was dark and cold, and there was no hope,” Denny said. “But the community had a sweetness to it, and everybody was so appreciative.”

When Denny wasn’t tending to people’s dental needs, said Kevin Seidler, a dentist in The Colony and leader of ServingHIM, “he might be out in villages giving food baskets and goats to families, showing them how to milk a goat and how to raise it.”

Denny also started most days in Romania with a predawn run, as he does on all his mission trips, thus intertwining two of his greatest passions.

“Both give me great joy and help keep my life in the proper perspective,” Denny said. “These trips require long travel, late nights and seeing as many patients as you can in a finite amount of time. My endurance training allows me on these trips to accomplish all our objectives.”

Helping at home

After one such trip, Denny and a friend, fellow Richardson dentist Doug Crosby, reached out to Network of Community Ministries to bring free dental services closer to home. They started a dental clinic for children, which is expanding to include a voucher program so people of all ages can seek dental care with local dentists.

“This has just transformed lives,” said Cindy Shafer, CEO of Network of Community Ministries. “We’ve had kids who were in pain with a whole mouthful of dental work that needed to be done. He’s the one who beats the bushes for people to volunteer in the clinic and for dentists to accept vouchers.”

In 2013, the year of the Boston Marathon bombing, Denny was on a bus with fellow runners being transported to the race’s starting line. Everyone was silent, save for two older gentlemen laughing in the back of the bus. Denny walked back to find out who they were. Turns out one was 78; the other, 81.

“I may finish last,” one told him, “and that’s OK. I’m still in the game.”

The next year, Denny ran Boston again, determined not to be stopped by the horrific bombing that occurred hours after his bus encounter. And now, eight years later, he still hears their words.

“Stop worrying. Be in the game,” he said. “There is a way for everyone to make a difference. And that’s why we’re here, to make a difference.”

Leslie Barker is a Richardson freelance writer and former staff writer for The Dallas Morning News.

Here’s how to reach the three organizations to which Mark Denny donates his time and dental expertise:

Amazon Mission Organization: amormission.org

Network of Community Ministries Medical and Dental Voucher Program: thenetwork.org/medical-dental

Serving HIM Healthcare International Ministries: servinghim.org