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## Smile Train back from Kenya

PJ orthodontist and his team volunteered to operate, teach in Nairobi

By **Jennifer Choi**

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Dr. Leon Klempler of Poquott recently completed his 12th voluntary mission trip to provide his services overseas.

An orthodontist practicing in Port Jefferson and Medford, Dr. Klempler traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, on Feb. 26 on behalf of Smile Train, an organization focused on repairing cleft lips and cleft palates — Dr. Klempler's area of expertise. Dr. Klempler visited Vietnam in 2007 on behalf of Health Volunteers Overseas, a private nonprofit organization dedicated to improving health care, and he has also traveled to 10 other developing countries on behalf of Operation Smile, a worldwide children's medical charity.

During his nearly two-week stay in Kenya, the orthodontist worked with the staff at Gertrude's Children's Hospital to help them integrate a multidisciplinary approach to treating patients with cleft lips and cleft palates, he explained. While Dr. Klempler worked with the dental team, his wife Laurie, who joined him overseas for the second time, assisted the staff in the labor and delivery suite at Aga Khan University Hospital.



Dr. Leon Klempler demonstrates treatment techniques to Dr. Sylvia Noah, local coordinator for Smile Train, in the pediatric dental clinic at Gertrude's Children's Hospital in Nairobi, Kenya. Courtesy Dr. Leon Klempler. ([click for larger version](#))

"I was really impressed with the level of care at the children's hospital, the dedication of the health care providers there and their drive to learn," Dr. Klempler said. "They're very appreciative, and the children were extremely happy and receptive."

Laurie, a per-diem registered nurse at Stony Brook University Medical Center, said she was also impressed with the high level of care at the Aga Khan University Hospital despite the lack of technology and resources. "They really work hard," she said, noting that the entire labor and delivery suite with about a dozen beds is equipped with only one fetal monitor, while at the SBUMC obstetrics unit each bed is paired with its own monitor.

Unlike his previous mission trips, Dr. Klempler was also joined this year by three other health care providers from SBUMC: plastic surgeon Dr. Alexander Dagum, audiologist Dr. Jamie Barbera and speech and language pathologist Kerri Ann Elorriaga.

Dr. Dagum, co-director of the Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Center at SBUMC, said he performed 12 cleft lip and palate operations on 10 patients in Kenya. "I demonstrated my technique for repair of

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complex cleft lips and palates and taught their young surgeons how to perform these types of surgeries using these techniques," said Dr. Dagum, a Stony Brook resident.



Dr. Noah welcomes the Stony Brook hospital volunteer cleft palate team, left to right: Laurie Klempler, Dr. Leon Klempler, Dr. Sylvia Noah, Kerri Ann Elorriaga, Dr. Jamie Barbera and Dr. Alexander Dagum. Courtesy Dr. Leon Klempler. ([click for larger version](#))

The plastic surgeon, who became a physician 23 years ago, said he has also volunteered his services in South America and China, where he has performed over 300 surgeries on indigent Chinese patients in the last six years, and plans to return to China in May and travel to Nicaragua in August.

Dr. Barbera, the audiologist on the Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Team at SBUMC, said her role in Kenya was to evaluate children with and without cleft palates and provide education to physicians, nurses, audiologists and students. "This has been a wonderful experience, both professionally and

personally," said Dr. Barbera, a Port Jefferson Station resident. "Working with the staff and the families in Kenya has been so uplifting. It was overwhelmingly apparent throughout the mission that, despite limited resources, morale is high and staff are motivated to further develop their programs so that they can provide quality services for their families. They were so very dedicated, always optimistic and focused on providing the best care possible."

The audiologist, who previously traveled to Guatemala on a medical mission, said the patients and their families in Kenya were "so very gracious and thankful" for the volunteers' services. Her time abroad reminded her to be "grateful for the education and services that are available to us here in the U.S., which we often take for granted," Dr. Barbera said. "I left with a renewed interest in not only providing audiological care to those in need but also to participate in providing education to the professionals that will be caring for these children in the future, with the hope that one day our assistance will no longer be needed."

Elorriaga, who also serves on the Cleft Palate-Craniofacial Team at SBUMC, said she helped develop the speech and language program at Gertrude's Children's Hospital in Kenya. Describing the experience as "humbling," Elorriaga, an Islip resident, said it was "very inspiring to see how much the professionals care and how they have such high expectations and high morale given the fact that they have so many obstacles in front of them."

After traveling abroad with a local team for the first time, Dr. Klempler said it was beneficial to have the group's assistance because repairing cleft lips and palates is a multidisciplinary process. Often in developing countries, parents are "embarrassed and ashamed" when their babies are born with cleft lips or palates, the orthodontist said, noting that many of those children are "basically cheated from having a life" because their families keep them hidden.

With hopes of continuing to provide his services overseas, Dr. Klempler said, "I feel extremely fortunate for everything that I have. It's a way of giving something back, and it feels good."

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