

# Healthy Life

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**"For light, we shined flashlights into patients' mouths and I wore a headlamp. To sterilize the equipment, we used pressure cookers."**

**Dr. Louis Theodos**

Danbury oral surgeon who volunteered in Honduras



Carol Kaliff/Staff photographer

## Helping in Honduras

A generous local doctor travels to treat the needy

By **Sandra Diamond Fox**  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**T**hey traveled up to five hours on foot along dangerous dirt roads through the night.

Some carried young children. Many were in pain.

All were headed to the same destination — the campsite in San Marcos, Honduras, where Danbury oral and maxillofacial surgeon Dr. Louis Theodos, 46, and a team of 16 other health care professionals were volunteering their services.

Theodos traveled to Honduras as part of a non-profit organization based in Massachusetts called Cape Cares. Since it was established in 1988, this organization has treated more than 70,000 people who have no access to ongoing medical treatment.

Honduras is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It has only one physician per 6,000 people and one dentist per 26,000 people.

For 10 days beginning in late February, Theodos, along with dentists, dental hygienists, pediatric nurses and physicians, set up a campsite in the center of town.

Each day, the team worked from 8 a.m. to sundown, in 90- to 100-degree temperatures.

In total, 460 people from about 10 outlying communities received treatment. Theodos treated 150 of them.

One of his patients was a teenaged girl who had a benign tumor above her eye socket that was partially blocking her vision.

"We gave her local anesthesia, laid her on a small table and removed the tumor within one hour," Theodos said.

Another patient was an elderly woman with a large facial tumor that caused paralysis on one side of her face.

"Because the tumor was so advanced, we were unable to treat her at our campsite," he said. "So, we directed her to the closest hospital and made sure someone in the village brought her there."

Out of everyone Theodos treated, however, there was one boy whom he

### PICTURE of HEALTH

remembered especially well.

The child, who was around 10 years old, had 15 rotten baby teeth that had to be removed. The other team members didn't think he would be able to sit still for the procedure.

"He was this adorable little kid who looked up at me with complete innocence and trust," Theodos said. Within 10 minutes, he had removed all the teeth.

"He didn't shed a tear the entire time."

What's unfortunate, Theodos said, is that the majority of conditions he treated had taken many months or even years to get to the stage they were in. With regular dental care, they were all preventable.

Theodos said the main reasons why there are so many cases of "rampant caries," or tooth decay, are poor oral hygiene and nutrition intake.

"Most of the people here make their living as sugarcane farmers," he said. "Many of the adults, and especially the children, spend hours sucking on sugarcane stalks, which leads to the decay."

Team members brought all their own provisions. For their meals, Cape Cares volunteers trained local women in modern-day cooking practices.

Without the use of electricity or running water, they had to rely solely on hand instruments.

"For light, we shined flashlights into patients' mouths and I wore a headlamp," Theodos explained. "To sterilize the equipment, we used pressure cookers."

Theodos' fluency in Spanish came in handy since he was able to communicate with all the patients and make them feel comfortable.

Aside from educating the Honduran people on modern hygienic practices, Cape Cares' long-term goal is to provide them with year-round health care, he said.

That goal was achieved in the Honduran community of San Jose de Pespire.

Theodos was part of a team that visited there in 1991.

"This community now has a full-time clinic staffed by a Honduran physician," said dental hygienist Christel Autuori, 57, co-president of Cape Cares. Autuori, a Ridgefield resident, worked alongside Theodos on his trip.

While healthcare is a big issue in this country, Autuori said, "It's important to remember that in the U.S., even if people don't have the means, they can still eventually get medical care from hospitals or clinics. People living in third-world countries like Honduras must rely solely on volunteers to get treatment."

Theodos felt the work he did was extremely rewarding and plans on returning again in the future.

"Part of my profession as an oral surgeon is reaching out to those in need," he said. "It's fulfilling knowing I actually helped people who wouldn't otherwise get help."

The Honduran people, young and old alike, showed appreciation for the treatment they received, Autuori said.

"You could see the gratitude in their eyes," she said.

"A patient would be standing there after an extraction with a mouthful of gauze," she related. "He would lean over and touch Dr. Theodos' arm or sometimes even give him a hug."

That would say it all.