

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Dentist gives Katrina victim new smile, life

By TOM BERG

2010-11-24 12:16:17



DANA POINT – She sits.

In a dental chair awaiting X-rays.

Refusing to open her mouth.

Nope. Nope. Nope.

A dental assistant asks a few questions. With each answer, Jennie Mitchell's hand shoots up to cover broken and missing teeth.

She is ashamed.

She'd quit smiling. Quit eating solid food. Quit the profession she'd done all her life.

"I became sad and lonely," Mitchell, now 54, of San Clemente, recalls. "I saw myself regressing."

She had survived so much to get into this chair. Now she wanted to run.

"I would've guessed she was 20 years older than she was," recalls certified dental assistant Bitsy Dietrich. "She was almost to the point of tears. She didn't even want to look you in the eye."

The dental assistant had seen her share of frightened patients over 23 years. None like this.

"She started telling me about all the things she'd been through," says Dietrich. "I got a little choked up."

When they finally got the X-rays taken, it showed a mouth needing seven extractions, three root canals and more than 20 crowns and bridges. Every tooth and gum in her head needed work.

As did Mitchell, who'd let her registered nurse's license expire after what she went through during Hurricane Katrina.

It was a mouth – and a woman – in need of a miracle.

WAR ZONE

Mitchell had just finished her overnight shift on Aug. 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina descended on Charity Hospital in New Orleans.

First the lights flickered out. Then the phones went down. Then it became clear the day shift wasn't coming to help. Nobody was.

For four days, she tended the sick and dying in the state's largest trauma center. She did this with no electricity, no running water, no working toilets, no air conditioning, no showers, no elevators, and at times, no hope.

"The emergency generators only lasted so long and when we started running out of that power, the people on life support...."

Her voice trails off.

According to CNN, the basement morgue flooded, forcing staffers to store the dead in stairwells. And helicopters seeking to rescue the dying turned back after taking gunfire from the streets below.

Chaos reigned. Through broken windows, nurses could hear gun shots and looting as inside temperatures soared over 100 degrees. With no water.

"It got insane," says Mitchell. "Imagine you went to a third-world country and they were in the middle of a war," she says. "That's what it felt like. Only you didn't have any help."

Nurses eventually fed each other IVs to keep hydrated.

"I thought I'd never want to be a nurse again after that," says Mitchell.

After the fourth day, the divorced mom of three grown sons was allowed to leave. She returned home to the north side of Lake Pontchartrain.

That's when she learned what a 28-foot wall of water can do to a 3-story townhouse.

FRESH START

It looked like doll house with one wall peeled back.

"You could look in and see all the furniture," she says.

Everything was ruined. The home condemned. And she had no flood insurance.

She gathered her two dachshunds and drove. In Texas, her car broke down and her dogs went missing.

"I fell apart," she says. "I just lost it."

It was the last straw. She boarded a train and prayed: "Lord, I don't know what you want me to do or where to go. But I'm trying to start over again."

She ended up in Dana Point, working as a night manager for a hotel. It took a few years to regain her footing. By then, her teeth were so bad that she feared seeing a dentist.

She gave up smiling, solid food.

But not helping others.

At Ocean Hills Community Church in San Juan Capistrano, she began cooking bread for the communion service. Cleaning up after hospitality events. And cooking turkeys each Thanksgiving for the homeless.

"We love Jennie," says Pastor Evan Liewer. "She makes people feel welcome and loved through her gift of serving. She's one of the volunteers I can always count on."

Eventually, she dared visit a dentist. The first one chided her for letting her teeth go, so she left in shame. She tried another.

"In a few hours," Mitchell says, "your whole life can change."

She is talking about what happened after Hurricane Katrina.

And about what happened after she met Dr. C.

GIVING THANKS

It did not start well, with Mitchell refusing to open her mouth.

But then dental assistant Bitsy Dietrich got X-rays. Office manager Reza Larijani put together a chart. And Dr. Lilian Cifarelli (Dr. C) promised: "We're going to fix this."

Even if Mitchell couldn't pay.

"Only a few times in your life do you meet someone that really touches your heart," says Cifarelli, the program director at Dana Point Dental. "She really just touched our hearts in a special way."

So began a two-year, \$40,000 gift to a woman who'd lost everything, even her smile. The only delay came after the third extraction when Mitchell needed time off – for brain-cancer surgery.

Cifarelli recently completed the restoration with 22 permanent crowns. Then the staff walked Mitchell to a mirror.

"It was like watching the most beautiful flower open," says Dietrich.

"It was like her teeth had been blocking the light from her soul," says Larijani.

"Instantly, her personality came out," says Dr. C, who's also donated dental work to battered women and returning war veterans. "She didn't hold it back any more. She let everyone see it."

Today, Mitchell is again feeding the needy at her church – with a smile. And a new reason to give thanks: She's studying to renew her nursing license.

"They've given me something that no one else was able to – the ability to smile again and feel good about myself," she says. "I don't know why they picked me. I'm just glad they did."

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