

# Bella

magazine

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# DR. KRISTI ELIA

## *On a Mission*

By Kevin Sims

Photos by Michael Orrell

**I**n less developed countries where any medical care is at a premium, dental care is often the most neglected. This is despite a direct link between poor dental hygiene and other serious medical conditions such as infections and gastrointestinal disorders and diseases.

the Nicaraguans.

Elia said she has heard how some doctors on missions become overwhelmed by the sheer number of people needing care, many of whom have never seen a doctor before.

“I’ve heard over there when they pulled teeth before, physically it’s straining on your hand to pull that many teeth,” she said. “If there are 3,000 people in line, one dentist can’t do it all.”

She said she heard that it could get to the point where she is instructing assistants on how to pull teeth to keep up with the demand, but she is hoping to get other dentists to go with her.

Despite anxiety over the high number of patients she could see, as well as not knowing what kind of facilities, if any, will be provided to perform dental work, Elia said she doesn’t know what to expect out of the trip, but from testimonials she has heard in church, she said she is aware that it will be a life-changing experience.

“I think it changes your perspective of everything,” she said. “Over here we have everything.

Over there they are happy with what they’ve got.”



This summer, as part of a mission trip sponsored by Cross Life Church, Dr. Kristi Elia will spend one week in Nicaragua — June 21-28 — providing professional dental services for the less fortunate.

But Elia is no stranger in using her talents to help those who might not be able to afford regular dental services, and said she has provided free care at various church-related functions in El Dorado over the past two years.

“Honestly, my heart is not really for missions. I believe we have a mission field in El Dorado,” she said. “I would love to take off a week here in El Dorado and serve people here.”

Elia said mission trips to Nicaragua come up every year at Cross Life with the church affiliated to the country through a family connection of its pastor, Dr. Dwain Miller.

Miller’s sister and brother-in-law own a residence in Nicaragua and provide housing as well as other services for anyone doing mission work from Cross Life.

The residence serves as a base of operation for spreading the Word of God as well as those, like Elia, who provide specialized skills for

*Creating*

*smiles*



But not everyone in El Dorado is as fortunate as she is, so Elia has volunteered her services to the community during Cross Life’s “Labor of Love” event.

Three years ago, Cross Life began doing “Labor of Love” on Labor Day when Miller asked his congregation if anyone was willing to sacrifice that day to serve people in El Dorado. Elia said not only did the church provide food for more than 1,000 people, the congregation donated items to be given away in a yard sale- like atmosphere where clothes, coats, TVs, appliances and tons of food were available.

Elia said the following year she asked what she could do to help, and it was decided that she could provide dental screening in a Sunday school room at the church.

The first year she saw around 50 people, but dental exams weren’t enough, she said, and she planned to do something bigger the next year.





“I thought ‘I don’t want to do dental exams.’ I’d go home and feel like I didn’t help anyone. They are still hurting. This year I said ‘I’m just going to go open my office,’” she said.

So in 2012, the church provided free service vouchers to anyone interested in same-day dental care at Elia’s office.

She said she pulled 25 teeth that day, a tiring feat, but she plans on continuing the service in the future.

“There are ArkKids and Medicaid available for some, but there is a segment of people who make too much money to qualify for the free dental care, but they don’t have a job that offers dental insurance and can’t afford to pay out of pocket,” she said. “I wanted to help those people.”

Elia, who was born and raised in El Dorado, said she always knew she wanted to go into the medical field, but she also wanted to be a mother some day. She said motherhood was her deciding factor in going into dentistry.

“After exploring the different medical professions, dentistry seemed to be one that was working with people - which I love - with flexible hours that would allow me to be a better mother,” she said.

After graduating and finishing her residency at Baylor College of Dentistry, Elia said she fulfilled her dream of moving back to her hometown to start a practice and build a family.

Originally, she said she planned to partner with a dentist in town, but due to unforeseen circumstances – as well as mounting student loans – she started immediately with her own practice.

And her first location – on Thompson Street – was less than ideal with shag carpeting, dark paneling and no natural light.

But in 2005, she built the office she always wanted at 225 N. Newton Ave.

“(The old building) had dark walls. Everything in here is light. There were no windows over there. Here there are windows everywhere,” she said. “This building is everything that one wasn’t.”





Dr. Elia donating her skills and time to  
*Girls Learning About Math & Science*



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