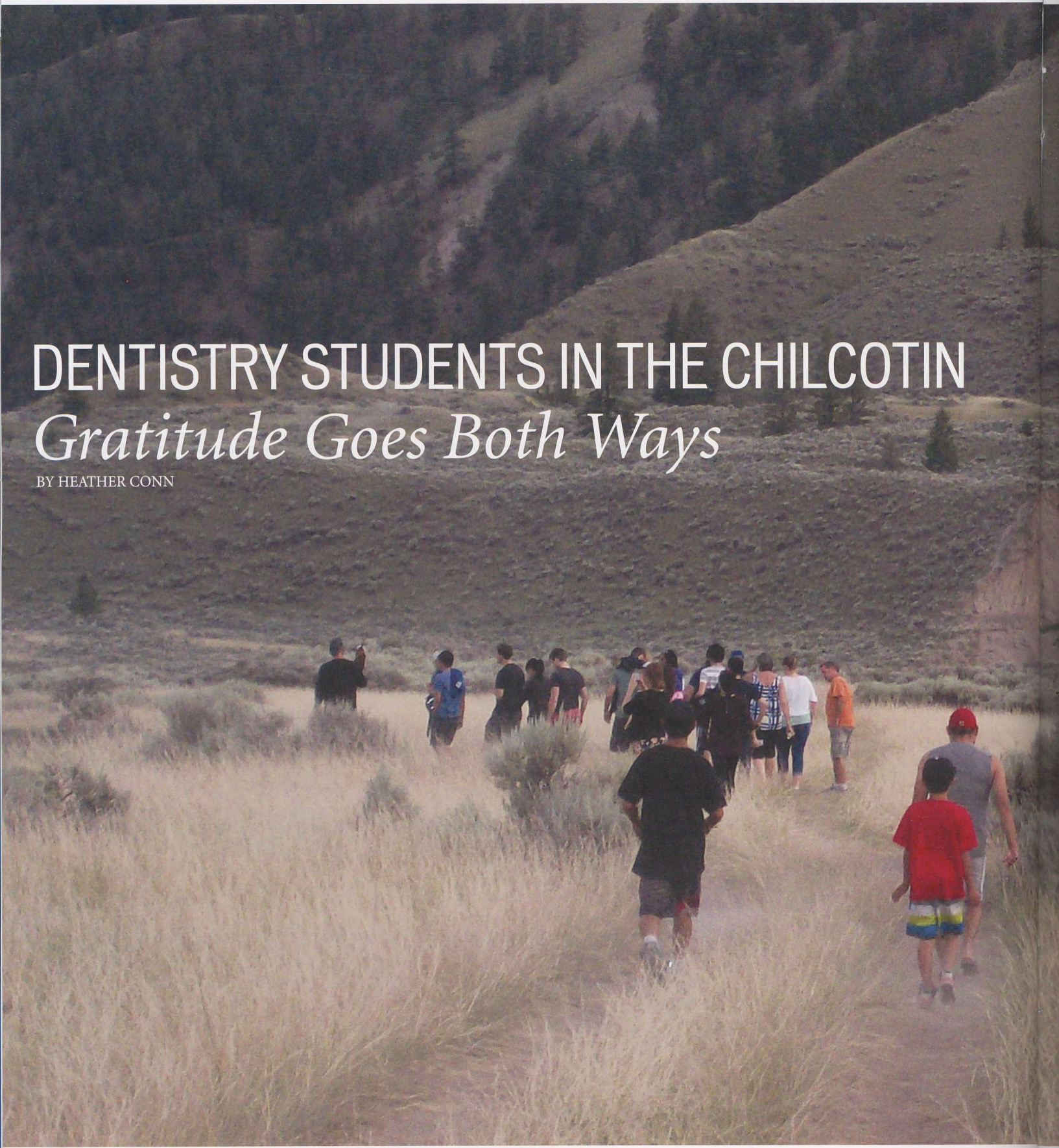


DENTISTRY STUDENTS IN THE CHILCOTIN

Gratitude Goes Both Ways

BY HEATHER CONN



For thousands of years, she has stood, curved and strong, along the Chilcotin River in north-central BC. Made completely of rough stone, her broad head projects diagonally from her long, narrow base less than two metres below. Throughout the year, flowers and personal items lie beneath her as offerings from local people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Sculpted naturally by time and nature, she is known as The Woman Who Turned to Stone, with her own legend, revered by local First Nations such as the Tsilhqot'in (Chilcotin) of Alexis Creek.



This past July, members of the Tsilhqot'in band brought a group of UBC Dentistry volunteers, which included 15 students, eight dentists, a dental hygienist, a dental assistant, two instructors and two Rotarians, to this sacred site. Standing amidst dried scrub, in the middle of a hill, they presented offerings to the hallowed figure.

The group was there as part of UBC Dentistry's first outreach clinic for the Tsilhqot'in on their remote Tl'etinqox (Anaham) reserve, about

110 kilometres west of Williams Lake. In such an isolated spot, where previous Tsilhqot'in members had died during teeth extractions in the residential school era, the arrival of non-Aboriginal outsiders could have easily provoked distrust and a refusal to participate.

But Tsilhqot'in chief Joe Alphonse ensured that this clinic was conducted with the utmost cultural sensitivity. With the help of First Nations elders, and council and band members, he immersed the UBC visitors

PHOTO BY JENNI PARSONS

Dental Outreach: A Caring Vision

The UBC Dentistry clinic at Anaham came together in less than a year, says Tsilhqot'in chief Joe Alphonse. Last winter, he met with faculty dean Charles Shuler at UBC's dental school. During the same period, UBC Dentistry faculty member Bill Brymer and Jenn Parsons, UBC Dentistry's manager of Alumni and Community Affairs, plus two Rotarians, Bob Blacker and Shirley-Pat Chamberlain, visited Alphonse's reserve.

Several years earlier, Blacker, a district governor of almost 100 Rotary Clubs in BC, and Chamberlain, grants officer at the Thompson Rivers University campus in Williams Lake, initiated interest in Anaham as a clinic location. Blacker and Doug Nielsen, a UBC Dentistry alumnus and Rotarian, had already set up a similar outreach clinic in the isolated Penelakut First Nation community on an island near Chemainus.

Blacker and Nielsen were inspired by the 2010 project Write to Reach, created by the former lieutenant governor of BC Steven Point, to increase literacy in the province's remote communities. They wanted to apply a similar approach using dentistry, says Brymer.



PHOTOS BY JENN PARSONS

in his people's traditions, from drinking soapberry juice to sharing community dinners of bannock and wild game. Along with Tsilhqot'in members, they played *slahal* or *lahal* ("bones" in English), a traditional game in which two teams try to guess who has a striped deer bone hidden in their fist; opposing team members choose fun distractions to thwart correct guesses.

The students stayed on the Anaham reserve, where several dozen wild horses arrived regularly to graze. They saw spectacular Farwell Canyon, its high ridges of limestone and sandstone hoodoos spread above the churning whitewater of the Chilcotin River. Once the site of a First Nations village, it still bears ancient pictographs on a cliff. From a nearby bridge, the visitors watched a skilled Aboriginal fisherman, roped to a rock with a safety harness, use dip nets to catch salmon in the rapids. Daniel Berant, who graduated last year from UBC Dentistry, says of his time there:

"For me, this [visit] was a realization of the variety of cultures we have in our own province that we're not aware of."

Before the UBC students provided any clinical treatments, the chief had Grant Alphonse, a Tsilhqot'in council member and principal of Anaham's elementary school, and Annette Frank, a certified teacher in Tl'etinqoxti language, brief them on what they could expect in communicating with their First Nations patients. Here are a couple of things the students learned:

- In traditional Tsilhqot'in culture, only a healer spoke directly to a patient; no one else was allowed to talk. The patient remained the focus. Therefore, today's behaviour in some medical and dentistry offices, such as a practitioner flirting with an assistant, laughing or discussing a recent movie while with a patient, is considered rude.



The Woman Who Turned to Stone.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CONNIE JASPER

- Since some Tsilhqot'in members do not speak English, they might agree to a procedure without understanding what it is. Silence does not mean agreement; it might mean fear and someone's readiness to flee. Local fluent speakers in the native language, such as Annette, would be on-site to translate.

Cultural sensitivity or competency—respecting and understanding Tsilhqot'in values, beliefs and lifestyles—was an integral part of the students' volunteer clinic experience, as was hands-on dentistry. This approach represents a significant contrast to the nightmarish stories of abuse within residential schools that the students heard during their visit.

In Chief Alphonse's words:

"The more cultures you meet, the more complete a person you are and the better a person you become."

By visiting the honoured sculpture along the Chilcotin, the UBC group gained an understanding of what practices have shaped the Tsilhqot'in nation's culture and way of life. "I saw how connected they are to the land," says clinic supervisor Evans Wiens, who graduated from UBC Dentistry in 2012. "They live how they've always lived."

Until 2010, that life included no local dental service for the roughly 1,200 people on the Anaham reserve. That year, a new state-of-the-art clinic opened with two dentist chairs, thanks to sponsorship from Health Canada and fundraising efforts by the Tsilhqot'in.

But the community had no funds for a dentist. In recent years, a visiting dentist has come to Anaham every other week. Otherwise, patients face a nearly two-hour drive to Williams Lake or even further to Quesnel or 100 Mile House to get treatment. Unless they are in extreme pain, most choose not to see a dentist. "It [dentistry] is a service that's much, much needed in our community," says Chief Alphonse.

The UBC student group augmented the Anaham clinic's two dental chairs with dentistry instruments and four portable chairs and dental units. After setting up in a meeting room, they were soon treating

patients, from young children to people in their 90s. Entire families arrived. Knowing that some had driven two hours to receive treatment was “a pretty awesome feeling,” says Carlee Beuk, a second-year UBC Dentistry student.

Their clientele were fearful and nervous at first, Wiens says, but soon relaxed and trusted their dentistry guests after experiencing respectful communication, patience and relief from long-time pain. Some patients hugged their dentist after a procedure; others left with big smiles. “I heard one lady tell a girl going into third year: ‘I want you to be my dentist all the time,’” says Beuk.

Fourth-year student Anderson (Yao-Sheng) Hsu says: “One woman told me: ‘Wow, you did a great job. I didn’t feel that [needle and extraction] at all.’”

During the clinic, UBC students and their team leaders saw 75 patients, mostly Aboriginals, over two and a half days. They conducted 93 procedures, primarily extractions and basic restorative work, providing almost \$18,000 worth of treatment without payment, says Wiens. (In Tsilhqot’in culture, there is no sense of receiving free service, says Grant Alphonse, since such benefits always involve giving back in some form. In this case, the Tsilhqot’in provided food, accommodations and entertainment and ensured that their guests felt comfortable throughout a variety of hosted activities.)

Grant Alphonse says he was nervous before receiving a filling, concerned that the UBC students might not be experienced enough. “I thought they’d be really rough,” he says, “but they were really careful and doing a good job.”

Besides acting as translator, Annette Frank had a cleaning, checkup and adjustment of her crown during the UBC clinic. “I really liked it,” she says. “They [students] really explained what they did. They were detailed.” She contrasted this to hurried dental service she had received in Williams Lake, which involved no explanation of procedures.

Frank laughed when recalling comments made by a 68-year-old, long-time Tsilhqot’in widow, who had six remaining front teeth cleaned. “She said: ‘Now tell me if I’m going to find a man or not.’ I said: ‘Anything’s

possible.’” This same woman had seen a dentist only twice in her life; she said that going to dentists in Williams Lake scared her.

“It [the clinic] was healing for some of our members,” says Chief Alphonse. “All of their teeth were rotting. To see them getting all their teeth extracted after 40 years of not trusting anybody. . . . Wow.”

When not in the clinic, the students experienced a traditional sweat lodge that focused on gratitude. “I felt very honoured to be invited in, listening to the hissing of the lava rocks and the steam, and being grateful,” says Hsu. “This community was built on gratitude for what’s around them.”

Beuk’s favourite activity was sitting around a table with Tsilhqot’in women sewing beads and buttons onto deer hide to make a medicine bag or pouch. “It’s something we could take back and keep with us, to remember this,” she says.

Hsu reinforced the welcoming warmth of the Tsilhqot’in people.

“They treated us like family. We showed them that we cared for them, and they responded back.”

Today’s students and their dedication to volunteer dentistry, social responsibility and related cultural understanding reflect a new generation of dentists, says UBC clinical assistant professor Bill Brymer. Having taught at UBC since 1975, he says that he has witnessed a positive change in student attitudes over the years. “They’re less self-involved now and are aware of people who are disadvantaged,” he says. “They want to give back.” Everyone in the visiting UBC group paid their own way to attend the clinic.

Chief Alphonse praised the students’ professionalism and rapport with patients. “Some wonderful, wonderful students are going to excel in their chosen career,” he said.

Most of the patients plan to wait until next year to get work done again in a UBC-run clinic, rather than receive dental care in the interim, Frank says. “Every person that went through [the clinic] was saying: ‘This is really good. We hope they come back.’”

After 20 Years of Neglect, Dentistry ‘Cubs’ Appreciated

After 20 years of no dentistry visits, Anaham Aboriginal elder Frank Setah was in pain, with a mouth full of rotting teeth.

“They were rotting to my gums,” says the 61-year-old, who has lived on the remote Anaham reserve his whole life. “I stopped going to the dentist because they were charging me too much. I didn’t have enough money.”

This past summer, he made an appointment with the UBC Dentistry clinic on his reserve, which did not charge fees. After he had two rotten teeth pulled, he left without a toothache. His wife Nancy, who arrived with a sore mouth, also felt better after having a tooth pulled.

At first they were “a little bit nervous,” Setah says, but they were happy with the treatment they received. “These guys [dentistry students] were just learning, but they’d tell you what they were going to do,” says the grandfather of 22 and great-grandfather of 10. “These cubs are pretty good.”

During his six years in residential school, Setah had dental checkups and one tooth pulled. Later, as an adult, he had two teeth pulled but left the clinic still in pain. “He [the dentist] didn’t tell you to come back.”

The elder says that he would like to visit a UBC Dentistry clinic at Anaham again and have his remaining rotten teeth removed. “It’s too expensive to go to Williams Lake.”



Chief Joe Alphonse (2nd R) is flanked by Dr. Christine Constabel and Bob Blacker, while David Hemerling DMD 1993 and second-year dental student Carlee Beuk look on.