

The Enduring Legacy of Kids Smiles Founder Dr. Joseph Greenberg



A H I S T O R Y



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The Emergence of Accessible Dental Care

When Kids Smiles founder Dr. Joseph Greenberg was a youngster in suburban New Jersey, his parents—a stay-at-home mom and a truck driver dad—revealed some life-changing advice to young Joe: Get good grades in school and you can be ‘absolutely anything in the whole wide world’ when you grow up. Soon enough, however, Joe discovered that, in his parents’ somewhat biased world view, “anything” meant only three possible occupations: physician, lawyer, or dentist.

That is how Joe Greenberg found himself enrolled in Rutgers University’s pre-med program, followed by dental school and two post-doctoral specialty programs at the University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. These combined experiences would shape his own world view of what dentistry could—and should—be.

At Penn, Joe listened to and watched Dr. Morton Amsterdam, founder and director of the Post-Doctoral Periodontal Prosthesis Program, handle cases so complex and specialized that they were affordable only to a few wealthy patients. Dr. Amsterdam often wondered aloud if the issues he treated could have been avoided if his patients had received better oral health care as children; so, acting on that idea, he supported the opening of a Post Doctoral Pediatric Dental Program in Philadelphia and took one of its first graduates, James Dannenberg, into his own private practice.

Dr. Joe would soon put Dr. Amsterdam’s belief in the importance of early preventive oral health care into practice himself when, in the early 1990s, a colleague from the American Academy of Esthetic Dentistry (AAED) asked for help to keep her Inglewood, California, non-profit children’s dental center open.

Dr. Cheryl Sheets had opened The Children’s Dental Center (TCDC) in a blighted urban neighborhood populated mostly by Hispanic migrants—a well-tended dental clinic located in a bomb zone of graffiti-covered buildings and piled-up garbage,” as Dr. Joe recalls of his initial visit.

As he watched TCDC's dedicated oral health educators delight enthusiastic young patients with props and word games, he could see that the Dental Center was about much more than just taking care of teeth. Its dedicated volunteers were not only teaching children about healthy oral habits, but also how to make healthy choices in many other aspects of their lives. Looking around the neatly landscaped, graffiti-free property, it was clear that the neighborhood valued this as well.

A \$5,000 grant from the AAED's Charles L. Pincus Foundation, which Dr. Joe led, helped keep The Children's Dental Center open; and when Dr. Cherylyn proposed opening a second center in Philadelphia a few years later, she enlisted Dr. Joe's help to find a location, practitioners, staff, and a board of directors. Faced with the sheer magnitude of this endeavor, however, he wondered if he had overcommitted himself.

Flying home from the 1997 AAED Conference in Cancun, Mexico after Dr. Cherylyn's request, he silently prayed for guidance on whether it was the right thing to do. Moments later, flight attendants urgently announced the need for anyone on board with CPR or other medical training. He quickly headed to the rear of the aircraft to find a young, Hispanic child in her father's arms, choking and not breathing. He repositioned her head, straightened her neck, and swept a finger inside her mouth to dislodge a stuck piece of food. As her color returned, he realized he had just saved her life...and received his answer.

With help from the Philadelphia mayor's office, city planners, and generous benefactors, the TCDC of Greater Philadelphia, as it was then called, zeroed in on two possible locations, both of which offered easy access to public transportation and schools—Frankford and Germantown. When Frankford Hospital offered to donate a building to house the Center, the decision was made; and by early 1999, the organization was moving toward opening, with a new name: ***Kids Smiles***.

The next two years were challenging. Turned down after reaching the final three candidates (the only dental one) of a major matching grant from the RWJ Foundation, the organization struggled financially and the building site that had been chosen for the Center was trashed by vandals. But Dr. Joe and his team persevered. He recalls being "filled with abundant

energy I hadn't had before or since." He spent lunch hours calling potential donors and evenings attending planning meetings; all to convey, in his words, Dr. Cherilyn's energy and passion for the project. His catchphrase—"Dental care is the 'hook' to attract children and their families to a total oral health immersion"—caught on and won over key supporters, including DentaEZ owner, Jeffrey Perelman.

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His efforts paid off when a longtime supporter donated enough money to keep the project alive as it sought a new location. And miraculously, one emerged shortly thereafter, when Keystone Mercy Health Plan agreed to rent space at one of its properties to the Center. The site, a former dental clinic, already was equipped with plumbing and sinks for a 7-chair facility; and so Kids Smiles continued moving ahead, eventually opening on January 15, 2001 with newly installed rooms of equipment from DentaEZ!

Kids Smiles' mission and goals were supported by then-Surgeon General David Satcher's 2000 National Report on Oral Health, a first-of-its kind report that focused attention on the oral health needs of the poor... especially underserved children. Onsite education, community outreach, and quality dental care for youngsters living in or on the edge of poverty—the same causes Dr. Cherilyn and Dr. Joe had been championing for the past decade—would certainly respond to Dr. Satcher's "call to action."

Nearly a quarter century after the original Children's Dental Center opened its East Coast counterpart, Kids Smiles has grown from a single dental center with four staff members to three centers with nearly 70 employees. It is a national model of affordable oral health care and has provided treatment to more than 80,000 patients.

Much of that growth has unfolded under the steady hand of Cheryl Janssen, who joined Kids Smiles in 2000 and remains its Executive Director today. Her quarter-century of leadership has carried the organization from a single struggling center into the regional model of pediatric oral health care it is now.

In the years just after she took the helm, Cheryl built out her leadership team, bringing on Mike Pugliese in 2003 as Marketing and Development Manager and Dr. Noni M. Mastra, a dentist and MBA, in 2005 as Chief Financial Officer. Mike would go on to serve as Chief Operating Officer for 22 years, part of the original executive team that grew Kids Smiles from an \$800,000 organization into an \$8 million one, while Noni is now celebrating 20 years with Kids Smiles as part of that same growth team.

That growth touched every corner of the organization. Director of Education Stacey Benner worked alongside Cheryl to bring the Kids Smiles oral health curriculum before the Pennsylvania Department of Education in 2007, which endorsed it and posted it to the state's Department of Health website. Kids Smiles also looked beyond Philadelphia, forming a partnership with KIPP Charter Schools in Washington, D.C. in 2010, one it eventually stepped back from due to violence in the surrounding community. Closer to home, the organization outgrew its original anchor location in the Mercy building on Island Avenue and relocated to Penrose Plaza in 2017. Its greatest test came in 2020, when COVID-19 forced a statewide shutdown of non-emergency dental care and a temporary layoff of 90% of its staff, before dentistry gradually resumed and full services returned that September.



*Kids Smiles Opening Celebration:
Lisa Schildhorn, Mark Goldstein, Alan Director, E. Marie Bothe, Joan Gluch,
Cheryl Janssen (Executive Director), Dr. Joseph Greenberg (President of The
Board), Senator Anthony Williams*

Unfortunately, many of Surgeon General Satcher's original findings remain true today. Tooth decay is still the most common chronic disease of childhood, millions of school hours are lost each year to dental pain, and dental infections remain the most common reason that children visit hospital emergency rooms. And while health equity initiatives definitely are gaining momentum, too few focus on oral health for children.

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Dr. Joe, now 79, remains a passionate advocate of early oral health intervention. He volunteers with the global Alliance for Oral Health Across Borders (AOHAB), through which he helps educate dozens of international students each year on oral health issues. He has recently been elected Chairman of the Section on Public Health and Preventive Medicine at the prestigious College of Physicians of Philadelphia, where he is guiding the College's 1200+ Fellows to view Public Health through the lens of oral health. He remains steadfastly optimistic that a unified oral health initiative will soon emerge to reduce the global burden of oral disease, of which childhood tooth decay is a major part. Additionally, most other chronic diseases will be favorably impacted by combatting oral diseases.

The work is imperative and time is short, he says. And most importantly, "The world's children are counting on us."

"The world's children are counting on us."

– Dr. Joseph Greenberg



Kids Smiles Leadership

*Left to right: Dr. Stan Horwitz, Pediatric Dentist and Board Advisor, Kids Smiles;
 Leonard Marinaccio, Investment Professional and Board Director, Kids Smiles;
 Eugene Johnson, Executive Director, Frankford Hospital;
 Dr. Cherilyn Sheets (kneeling), Founder and 1st President of The Children's
 Dental Center and Board Director, Kids Smiles;
 Dr. Joseph Greenberg (kneeling with key), Founder and 1st President, Kids Smiles
 Carole Sandberg, Board Advisor, Kids Smiles;
 Elizabeth McQuiston, Business Manager, Kids Smiles;
 Richard Mariano, Philadelphia City Councilman and Board Advisor, Kids Smiles;
 Janice Marinaccio, Board Director, Kids Smiles;
 Barbara Caplan, Philadelphia City Planner and Board Advisor, Kids Smiles;
 Sharla Feldscher, PR Professional and Board Advisor, Kids Smiles;
 Rev. Robin Hynicka, Frankford Group Ministries and Board Director, Kids Smiles*



Acknowledgments

Today's Kids Smiles owes its success to the dedicated individuals who founded, funded, and supported the original Children's Dental Center (California) and The Children's Dental Center of Greater Philadelphia.

While it's impossible to thank everyone, the following list includes our current board of directors along with many of TCDC's earliest and most dedicated supporters:

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The Kids Smiles Mission:

*To create positive health behaviors
and ensure that every child has
access to quality oral health care,
regardless of ability to pay.*



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