When we last checked in with Clarice Yentsch and Wally Smith, the masterminds behind the "Mobile Smile Maker" initiative for the Waypoint Foundation of Key Largo, they were hosting a dental exhibition at Key Largo Library in honor of National Children’s Dental Health Month. They were also hitting the ground to raise funds to purchase a mobile dental clinic. Now, thanks to generosity from the Ocean Reef Community Foundation (ORCF), they could be nearly halfway there.

A mobile dental clinic is essentially a tricked-out bus with dental equipment and exam chairs that will travel to schools, providing high quality, free dental care to kids in Monroe County. Critically, services will be available to impoverished youths who don’t have access to full dental care.

The existing program through the Florida Keys Area Health Education Center Inc. (AHEC) dental sealant program is limited, serving around 700 students a year and only seeing kids in the 2nd and 7th grades. Due to lack of resources, services also stop at problem identification and sealants. Parents often have to find another dentist to do any repair work.

The mobile clinic, which includes two chairs, will work with AHEC and move from school to school and provide comprehensive dental care to any kids who need them, Yentsch said.

"It takes it to a whole new level," she added. "We feel a mobile clinic is the most cost effective and sustainable way to get dental care to these underserved kids."
The cost to purchase a used, two-chair mobile clinic is $125,000.

The Waypoint Foundation has been calling on friends and foundations for funding help, and ORCF has answered that call.

“Our annual community grants program funds projects in the Upper Keys, Homestead and Florida City to improve the quality of life in the communities where the thousands employed at Ocean Reef live and raise their families,” said ORCF Executive Director Yurianna Mikolay. The foundation also creates special programs such as COVID-19 Relief and Florida Keys Hurricane Response funds, which offer assistance Keys-wide in response to emergency situations.

“AS THE WAYPOINT FOUNDATION’S VOLUNTEER DENTAL CONSULTANT, I AM MOST IMPRESSED THAT THE OCEAN REEF COMMUNITY FOUNDATION RECOGNIZED THE NEED TO SUPPORT THE SMILEMAKER PROGRAM WHICH WILL BRING MUCH NEEDED DENTAL CARE TO THE CHILDREN, AND IN PARTICULAR THE DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN, IN THE FLORIDA KEYS.” – DENTIST, WALLY SMITH

Each year, the foundation distributes over $1 million in community grants to dozens of charities. In 2020, over $1.4 million will go to 66 projects. The funding comes from the generosity of the Ocean Reef community, said Mikolay.

This year, one of these is the Mobile Smile Maker Initiative, which has received a $50,000 matching grant from ORCF to help procure the clinic for the Keys.

“The Waypoint Foundation’s Smile Marker Initiative presents an innovative, well-considered solution to meet the unique needs of the Florida Keys,” said Mikolay. “The role of Keys AHEC, a trusted partner, in coordinating the project throughout the Monroe County School District is a key factor in our extending such a large grant to a first-time applicant.”

Mikolay noted the “dramatic shortage of dentists in the Keys and very few who accept Medicaid.” She said, “This project will ensure that all school children in Monroe County have access to dental care. That’s a really big deal!”

The Waypoint Foundation hopes the $50,000 ORCF grant will interest “angel” donors to contribute the other $50,000. They currently have “a grip” on about $25,000 from the community, said Yentsch.

GOLIA, CURATOR OF SMILE MAKER EXHIBIT AT KEY LARGO LIBRARY

Originally, the clinic sought funding from state Senate appropriations. Receiving a 10-0 pass in the State House Health Committee, it moved to the Senate where it was in great position, until coronavirus hit, said Yentsch. According to bill tracker, as of March 14, bill 2157-2020 has been “Indefinitely postponed and withdrawn from consideration.”

While bummed about that outcome, Yentsch and Smith remain stubbornly optimistic and focused on getting the clinic to the Keys. The drop-dead date for them to raise $50,000 to gain the ORFC grant money is the end of March 2021, though Yentsch noted they will need to reach their goal much sooner to procure the unit in time.

"The goal has not shifted. We want the clinic in hand by school year 2021. September 2021," Yentsch said. “The schools will eventually open, and kids will still need good dental care. So we decided, our most compassionate position will be to stick the course.”

Mikolay agreed, saying, "Children’s health was hugely important before the pandemic and it must continue to be a top priority. We can’t allow the pandemic to derail our priorities and goals for local families.”

The foundation director concluded with a plea to community members: "We’re hopeful the current crisis will not negatively impact the Waypoint Foundation’s ability to raise funds for this important initiative. The project is an exciting opportunity that will touch virtually every child in the Keys and we hope that the community will share our enthusiasm. Ultimately, it’s your support that will determine whether Waypoint can meet our match challenge to make it happen.”

More information is at www.mobilesmilemaker.org/.

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Tiff Duong is self-made mermaid who loves all things cheesy (romantic and dairy) and thrives in the 3 am hour. She believes in leaving it all on the field and has never met a (mis)adventure she didn't love.