

## **WSDA Citizen of the Year: Dr. Eugene Sakai**

You can be sure that Dr. Eugene Sakai's face is flushed with modesty as he reads this article announcing him as recipient of the WSDA's prestigious Citizen of the Year award. To say that Dr. Sakai is humble is an understatement at best. This soft-spoken Vancouver dentist does not think much about the contributions he's made to his community – but his colleagues do.

"I can't begin to express what Dr. Sakai's work has meant to the populations that I work with at the health department. I finally have something to offer the people who call me with a dental emergency but no money to pay for care," said Melody Scheer, oral health coordinator, Clark County Health Department. "The oral health of our county's residents has been improved significantly because of him."

From 2000-2004 Dr. Sakai volunteered at Smile Savers, a Vancouver-based dental program for low-income patients, but when the clinic closed its doors in May 2004, thousands of county residents had few places to turn. That is, until an anonymous donor gave the Free Clinic of SW Washington \$250,000 – enough money to purchase a mobile dental van.

At the time Dr. Sakai had been working with a group of volunteers called the "Dental Dogooders" to store the dental instruments, supplies and equipment left behind by Smile Savers, and work to find a new clinic to help the underserved. When the donation came in he was overjoyed; he helped setup the two operatories, coordinated volunteers, and attracted even more philanthropic funding for the new clinic's facilities and operations.

"Working with Smile Savers made me realize that dentists have skills that not many other people have, and that we can really make a difference by using our talents," said Dr. Sakai. "Most of us dentists are so busy and isolated in our own practices that we don't see the need in our community. When I started volunteering, 99 percent of the people served were on DSHS. I didn't realize the need."

The emphasis of the dental van, which is located at the Free Clinic of SW Washington in Vancouver, is to provide children and adults with pain relief and infection control, said Dr. Sakai. He continues to volunteer regularly there as a dentist and is an advocate for others to volunteer.

"Dr. Sakai didn't set out to change the face of dentistry for the underserved in Clark County; he just wanted to help a few people who couldn't find care," explained his friend and colleague, Dr. Rich Mielke. "He knew he couldn't do it

alone, so he found other dedicated leaders to join with him. Dr. Sakai gives them the credit, but it was his persistence and connections within the dental society that made it possible to succeed on this scale.”

Estimates are that the clinic donates \$30,000 in dental care per month when operating at its full potential. Twenty-six dentists volunteer on a rotating basis, and approximately 345 county children and adults have received free care including screenings, extractions and restorations since its inception. In February 2006 volunteers also began placing sealants on first year molars in students throughout the Vancouver School District.

“It was Dr. Sakai’s vision, belief and energy that kept these goals alive,” said Ann Gilbert, dental program coordinator at the Free Clinic of SW Washington. “He is a dentist with a compassion and energy for the underserved dental population, and is a hard act to follow.”

Originally from eastern Oregon, Dr. Sakai grew up in Spokane, attended Washington State University and Oregon Health Sciences University, and following graduation volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War, stationed in Okinawa. Dr. Sakai settled in Vancouver and established a practice in 1973.

Now “semi-retired” (working four days a week), he devotes countless hours to volunteering on the dental van and sits on the Free Clinic Dental Advisory Board. Calling dentistry his “hobby,” Dr. Sakai said he chose the profession because he likes working with his hands, and is compelled to help the underserved because the people he cares for remind him of the community where he grew up.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, his family was forced into a Japanese-American internment camp. Dr. Sakai was born there in 1944. His father, who had ambitions to become a mechanical engineer, later took a job as an hourly worker at Kaiser Aluminum in Spokane.

“The economic level of the people we serve in the clinic is similar to what it was like where I grew up,” said Dr. Sakai. “I guess that instilled in me a compassion or understanding for their situation.”

He’s also a dedicated father to two children, Kali, 32, and Austin, 28.

A youth basketball and football coach, cub master and mentor, Dr. Sakai has been a member of Southwest Washington Math, Engineering and Science Opportunities, an organization that promotes career awareness in science, math

and engineering, and encourages minority students to explore careers in these fields. In 1996 he received the Washington State University Dad of the Year Award, which he was nominated for by his daughter.

So it came as no surprise to those who know Dr. Sakai that he would combine his love for helping people with his passion for dentistry: "Dr. Sakai is a very gifted dentist with a huge heart for people," said his colleague, Dr. Constance Brown. "His caring nature and giving example cause us to admire him as a peer. He truly inspires us to be better professionals."

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