

# NEVADA STATE OF MIND

Heather Parsons, DMD, Ped Dent '13, returned to her home state of Nevada to provide oral healthcare for those in and around Carson Valley.  
Photos by Bryan Geiger

## Community Outreach Experiences Inspire Parsons '13 to Open a Rural Pediatric Dentistry Practice

By Liza N. Burby

Heather M. Parsons, DMD, Ped Dent '13, can point to four pivotal experiences that steered her toward buying a pediatric practice in Minden, Nevada, a small town north of the city of Reno that pulls from surrounding rural communities, with caregivers from as far as three hours away to access their child's dental care.

Getting braces when Parsons was in middle school was one of those events, or more specifically, going to orthodontist appointments. "Everybody was just so nice and the office was fun with a Hawaiian surfing theme on the walls, surfboard benches and all the giveaways," she recalled.

The whole experience was welcoming and friendly, and I loved the way my teeth looked afterwards. It changed my confidence, self-esteem and probably the trajectory of my life in the long run.

Later as a college sophomore, she was considering medical school when her advisor suggested she first check out the fields that interested her. So she shadowed her former orthodontist and was sold on her career direction. She just hadn't realized she had to go to dental school first. But she committed and was on track until her second year of dental school at Boston University. That's when two required internships — one in Nevada and one in Boston — changed her path.

"I was fortunate that both of those internship experiences were with pediatric dentists," Parsons said. "I had great mentors in welcoming offices. It was always positive and everybody that worked there loved the kids. That's when I decided I was going to do pediatric dentistry instead of orthodontics."





*Parsons' desire to care for pediatric patients can be attributed in part to her participation in outreach events while she was a resident at Stony Brook.*

## Inspired By Class

She was further influenced by another more personal experience. Parsons, who is married and has a 3-year-old daughter, said she came from a resource-poor family, so from a young age she was very driven. "I wanted to do something where I knew I would be financially comfortable, but with flexible hours so I could have a family. So that's what I set out to do."

She was matched at Stony Brook University School of Dental Medicine (SDM) for pediatric dentistry residency and spent two years here before she went back out west to be closer to family. She said she initially chose the SDM because she liked the east coast. When she got to campus, Parsons enjoyed working with the other residents and was particularly motivated by Dr. Fred Ferguson, the former director, who she said was passionate about his work.

"The classes at SDM are the foundation for everything I do," Parsons said. "Dr. Ferguson emphasized prevention and taking care of the more vulnerable groups. He loved special needs dentistry and we got a lot of exposure to that so it was easy for me to be passionate about it too."

And that led her to the fourth experience that solidified her career choice. To this day, the residency program incorporates a busy schedule of community outreach, according to Rhona Strizak Sherwin, DDS '78, clinical professor and director of pediatric dentistry outreach in the Department of Orthodontics and Pediatric Dentistry. That includes using the Mobile Dental Care Center at community health centers, home visits for Head Start and WIC sites.

"When Heather was a resident, there were not that many pediatric dentists in Suffolk County, so we were very active, spending "full days at elementary schools" and with families at a homeless shelter," Sherwin said. "The good thing about our outreach program is there's a continuity of care because we return on a regular basis so the kids are getting full operative care."

I think that all the hours Heather spent as a resident in the mobile van doing school-based oral health education for Head Start and screenings gave her the impetus to feel that working with the underserved population was beneficial."

## Creating Access To Care

Parsons concurred. "Stony Brook played a very big role in choosing the path I did, how I practice and how I feel about the populations that I get to treat. Seeing what little resources that some people have, and then seeing their desire to give a better life to their children and do whatever they can in order to make that happen was pivotal to me."

Outside of dental school, she had a similar experience with international missions in Nicaragua and Panama where people in pain often had to wait in line for eight hours just to see a dentist.

"Knowing what parents went through to get their child's dental treatments made me want to put myself in a position in a rural area where it's harder to access those services, versus just being in a city where there's many other dentists down the street," she added.

After SDM, Parsons worked in a Long Island pediatric practice briefly then spent two years working in Reno. But she was drawn to the Minden practice, Valley Pediatric Dentistry, where she became an associate. She enjoyed the community, she said, so when the owner retired in 2016 she bought his

practice. Parsons kept on a crucial staff member, which helped her to learn the business side.

She has since discovered that having her own practice means she's a small business owner and has to be good at leadership skills, interpersonal communication and know everything about how an office works — from the front desk to the financials to maintenance.

It takes humility, being open-minded and willingness to make mistakes," Parsons said. "It's not for everybody, and I think that it's good to know that before you get into it."





Opportunities For Prevention

Parsons has a busy practice, seeing about 30 to 40 patients a day four to five days a week. Her patients range from infants to 18-year-olds and include both children and adults with special needs and disabilities “because a lot of practices don’t have the capacity to see these children and adults,” she said. She focuses on preventive and restorative treatments, treating patients using in-office general anesthesia, as well as “everyday dentistry while patients are awake.”

Her community outreach experiences as a resident continue to resonate in her current practice where she’s one of the only specialty offices to care for children in her community. “Their needs are beyond the scope of a local-to-them general dentist who doesn’t have the resources to treat children or people with special health care needs who need more intervention, such as sedation, or specialty care like pediatric crowns and pediatric root canals,” she said.

For many of the families she sees, dental care is a financial obstacle, so her practice accepts all of the state-funded insurance plans. But Parsons said the benefit of her office is that they try to price fees reasonably and give high-quality care to everyone. While hers isn’t a community health center, she does offer pro bono care through the Northern Nevada Dental Health Programs.

She has found that prevention awareness for children under five is lacking in Minden where many families rely on their general dentist who she said often have the philosophy that children don’t need to have a dental visit until age three to five. Parsons sees this as a missed opportunity for preventive education.

As a result, by the time she sees these young patients, she’s often dealing with “16 carious lesions”. She believes that more outreach and education would be helpful to get children referred at a younger age, no matter what dentist they see first.

“A lot of my job is education of the public, the general dentists and the pediatricians,” she said. “We do a lot of outreach events. We work with the local hospital and their community health fairs, and we do presentations in the preschools to get the word out to have their first visit by age one or by the eruption of their first tooth. But it’s an uphill battle for sure.”

Another difficulty of being in a rural area is finding staff who are willing to commute there. “Keeping a full team is very challenging because there’s not as many people available,” she said.



Making It Enjoyable

But Parsons’ favorite aspect of her job is watching the children grow and seeing how positive they feel about coming to her office.

“It’s a daily reaffirmation that we’re helping kids enjoy coming to the dentist. You have to go to the dentist for the rest of your life,” she said.

“For me it’s so important that these childhood experiences are positive because they are going to stick with them for their entire life.

We take very seriously that every kid who comes through our door needs to have a positive experience.”

Parsons said she doesn’t regret not becoming an orthodontist, but she does make sure that fun experience she remembers as a teen is available in her office with cheerful decorations, videogames, sugar-free lollipops and a toy machine.

In her seven years in the practice — and throughout her career — what has made her happiest is the relief on children’s faces when they’re out of pain. “There’s nothing like that look. Just knowing that you help that child have a better quality of life is important to me.”

Liza N. Burby is a freelance writer, editor and author who frequently writes about medical topics.



Parsons finds great joy in relieving a patient of their pain, stating “Just knowing that you help that child have a better quality of life is important to me.”