Smiles from the Dominican Republic

By Karen Sawarna, Youth Intern with Sonrisas

While vacationing in the Dominican Republic almost ten years ago, Elina Katsman, a Canadian registered dental hygienist (RDH), noticed that many poor Dominican children were in urgent need of dental care. After returning to Canada, she put her mind to formulating a plan to help the children by providing them with primary dental education. Elina spent much time fundraising and lobbying to obtain the education materials, toothbrushes and dental floss she needed for her project. After a lot of hard work, several dentists and dental supply companies had come to share her eagerness to help.

By 1989, her project was up and running and many Dominican children were receiving their first lessons in oral hygiene. The project was such a success that Elina decided to expand her work beyond dental health education. By 1991, she had raised enough funds to open her first non-profit dental treatment clinic in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. Here, children of underprivileged families received services for free, and adults paid rates lower than other private clinics. The clinic was named Sonrisas, which means “smiles” in Spanish.

In 1996, the impetus behind Sonrisas slowed as dental supplies ran low, equipment aged and the dentists supporting the project found it harder to handle the ever-increasing demands for affordable dental treatment in the Dominican Republic. In response to their needs, Elina established a small office in Toronto, Ontario and worked non-stop to find help. In just two years, she raised enough support to supply the existing five clinics, and even opened a new clinic.

National expansion of Elina’s Sonrisas clinics has helped the development of the Dominican Republic. Almost 500,000 children and their parents have received dental treatment that otherwise they could not have afforded. Today, six dental clinics operate in five cities of the Dominican Republic. Also new, if children cannot afford to travel to the clinics, the clinics will travel to them. Sonrisas now has four mobile dental treatment units that visit schools, community centres, isolated communities and rural areas. Dentists working in the mobile units provide dental hygiene education, fluoride applications, cleaning, restorative dentistry, and extractions. Two of the mobile units operate with a generator powering dental instruments.

Building on their long-time base, and with the help of Canadian Feed the Children, Sonrisas now plans to establish a health education project in the Dominican Republic to cover reproductive health and family planning, women and children’s rights, nutrition and disease/HIV prevention. To reach those most in need, five mobile health units will visit rural areas. Each unit will have a health educator to create networks of women’s groups in towns and villages, as well as a doctor/dentist. This grassroots umbrella strategy will enable continued national support for health education and services through a network of community-based women’s groups. Sonrisas believes this project will also help empower local women and, consequently, support women in particular in their roles as economic contributors and decision-makers within their communities.

Elina Katsman has dedicated her life to the people of the Dominican Republic. The employees and volunteers who contribute their time to Sonrisas share her energy. Together, they make healthcare available to those who need it most. Their efforts help children and adults in the Dominican Republic develop into healthy, confident people who can contribute to the development of their country.

For more information on the Sonrisas project, please contact Elina Katsman in Toronto at (416) 661-8520, by mail at 2727 Steeles Avenue West, Suite 301, North York ON, M3J 3G9, or by e-mail at Sonrisas@CIMtegration.com.