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2017 ADA

Humanitarian Award Winner

Dr. Usa Bunnag



At Sobmauy village in Maesariang, Thailand

Dr. Usa Bunnag fell in love with Thailand 14 years ago, but her dedication to giving back through her profession dates back more than twice that. In recognition of her service at home and abroad, Bunnag has been selected as the 2017 recipient of the prestigious ADA Humanitarian Award.

Bunnag was born in Thailand but moved to the U.S. as a teen and grew up in the Northeast. Only two years after she received her degree from the Howard University School of Dentistry in Washington, D.C., Bunnag was providing free dental care for the Buddhist monks who lived in the D.C. area, a service she continues today. In private practice, she treats children through the Maryland Medicaid program, an effort that has helped countless children receive needed dental care.

In 2003, after Bunnag returned from Thailand for the first time since she left, she founded Smiles on Wings. Through the mission's biannual trips, Bunnag and her team of volunteers on average can treat hundreds of children each visit. The number of patients treated depends on the length of the visit. Even when she returns home to Bethesda, Maryland, Bunnag keeps support in Thailand by sponsoring year-round lunch programs for school children, sponsoring water filtration projects, and creating scholarships for students interested in healthcare or teaching careers.

Bunnag was featured in the May 2016 issue of *Dentaltown*, where she wrote about the difficulties and challenges of the program's efforts.

"The journey of Smiles on Wings began in 2003, during a trip I took to the Mae Sariang district of northern Thailand. ...

On our first visit to this mountainous terrain bordering Myanmar, my husband and I knew that our goal would be to bring dental care to the villagers who populate the area—even though doing so would require the help of a team of dedicated people."

Honoring others through service

Bunnag attributes her eagerness to give back to others, especially those in her homeland of Thailand, to her mother.

She left Thailand at the age of 14 with her father to live in the U.S. It would be the last time Bunnag saw her mother. Years later, when she passed away, Bunnag was in dental school and could not afford to go back home to say goodbye. Her decision to go back to Thailand is a tribute to her mother.

Bunnag has said that being altruistic is in her blood, and that being kind is something her mother taught her.

On her most recent trip to Thailand last January, she organized and coordinated two missions with a team of dentists, hygienists and helpers, who treated a total of 274 patients (1,413 procedures).

"On my most recent trip in January 2017, I organized and coordinated a dental mission in southern Thailand where we have a permanent dental clinic," Bunnag said. "We also carried out our first leadership retreat for our young scholars and graduates from our scholarship program to empower and mentor these future leaders."

To date, Bunnag, along with her team, have treated thousands of patients in the U.S. and abroad.

"It is an honor to be recognized for the work that I do," Bunnag said. "As the first woman dentist to win this prestigious award, I hope to inspire the young women that are entering the field of dentistry. As a dentist, there is an opportunity to give back and to make a difference to the communities or the world despite the demand of our profession and our personal lives. As an immigrant, I hope that I can also inspire many immigrants in the U.S., whether practicing dentists or other professionals, that they can give back to their adopted country and to their homeland as well."

Honoring others through service

Smiles on Wings isn't the only program Bunnag has established. She has founded or helped create an additional six programs aimed at everything from dental clinics to scholarships and post-tsunami reconstruction efforts, all of which are carried out under Smiles on Wings.

"With more than three decades serving the underserved in Thailand and here at home, Dr. Bunnag inspires all of us to be humanitarians in our own unique ways as dentists," ADA President Dr. Gary Roberts said in the official award's official announcement. "Her



The children saying thank-you and goodbye

Smiles on Wings programs have transformed thousands of people all around the globe, and it is the Board's honor to bestow the 2017 ADA Humanitarian Award to her for her devotion and dedication."

The award recognizes distinguished members of the dental profession who have spent a minimum of 10 years helping underserved populations in the U.S. or abroad. Along with the recognition, Bunnag will receive \$10,000 toward the charity of her choice. A dental professional must be nominated for his or her efforts, and cannot nominate themselves.

As part of the process, the ADA hears directly from those involved or impacted by a nominee's charitable work. In his letter of support for Bunnag, Dr. John Savukinas described the award-winning doc as a true leader, role model and inspirational colleague. Savukinas has volunteered five times with Smiles on Wings.

"The first time I volunteered, I wasn't sure what to expect," he wrote in his letter to the ADA. "But it was truly an amazing experience. ... We were able to treat so many patients who were in great need of dental care."

Perhaps one of the most powerful endorsements—and evidence of Bunnag's impact—comes from Renu Srisawaidaorunag, who graduated from college in 2012 thanks to a Smiles on Wings scholarship. Srisawaidaorunag returned to her home village as a community health officer and now provides midlevel healthcare to her village.

"My family is poor. Our village is very remote. It takes an hour [with a] four-wheeled drive [vehicle] from the nearest town, and another hour by boat to reach [it]. In the rainy season, traveling is very dangerous," Srisawaidaorunag wrote to the ADA in nomination of Bunnag. "Through Dr. Usa and Smiles on Wings, I have returned home to help my village with the skills to improve the lives of the entire community."

Srisawaidaorunag called Bunnag an example for her and her people to strive to make a difference in the community.

"I pledge to continue to carry out her mission and vision for many years to come," she said. "Without Dr. Bunnag, the girls from villages like me would not be able to attend college. I owe my deepest gratitude to Dr. Bunnag and Smiles on Wings."

Bunnag will accept her award in a ceremony honoring her efforts in October at the ADA's 2017 annual meeting in Atlanta.

For more information, visit smilesonwings.org. ■



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