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Homeless Not Toothless

posted by [Michael Allen](#)



Homelessness is a problem that affects many communities across the United States, but is more pronounced in big cities such as Los Angeles, which has a sizeable homeless population.

Fortunately, there are guardian angels in the City of Angels such as Dr. Jay Grossman, who provides dentistry for homeless people at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars out of his own pocket. His non-profit charity is called [Homeless Not Toothless](#).

The Playa Wire recently caught up with Dr. Grossman at his busy office in Los Angeles and chatted with him about his past, present and future plans.



The Playa Wire: How did you come up with the idea for Homeless Not Toothless?

Dr. Grossman: I went to NYU for my dental training and met my wife there. She's from Santa Monica, CA (in Los Angeles County). We went out there to visit her folks and I fell in love with (nearby) Brentwood. So I closed

up shop in New York and moved to California in 1989. I didn't have a California license to practice dentistry, so I joined the Navy as a dental officer because they would accept a New York license.

I did one tour of duty as a dental officer, got my California license and hung my shingle in Brentwood. Back then, I had no patients; I was starting from scratch. Everyday I drove to my office and I would pass by the VA Hospital and, on the corner, there was a veteran with a sign that said, "Will work for food."

So I reached into my wallet and I gave him a dollar every day. Then I thought "This just isn't making a big enough difference, what I really need to do is end the cycle." My business card was right next to my money in my wallet. Looking at my business card, I thought, "I could do more with the skills that I have as a dentist than I can with the few dollars I have in my wallet."

So instead of handing him a dollar, I handed my business card to this veteran and I said, "If you're really interested in ending this horrific rut that you're in, come see me. I just opened my practice; I've got tons of time because I've got no private patients right now. I'll take a look and see what I can do about your mouth."

Slowly, but surely, more homeless patients started to come in. And I thought, "I don't want to give them teeth and just be done with them. If I really want to have a solution to this challenge, I need to cause them to be sober and actively look for work." So I set up relationships with sobriety programs in West LA. To get them jobs, I partnered up with the Chrysalis in Santa Monica.

Chrysalis is a job placement organization that has a 92% job placement rate. So my new deal for homeless people was: Show me that you've had three months of sobriety, show me that you've registered at Chrysalis and I'll give you teeth so that you can go interview at the job leads that Chrysalis is giving you.

That's one of the biggest issues they have, either they're in a lot of tooth/gum pain, or they don't look good and nobody will hire them. The amount of jobs that you can actually do without teeth is very limited. So that's how the program started, that was in my first year of practice in 1991 when I got out of the Navy.

The Playa Wire: How many homeless people have you helped since starting Homeless Not Toothless?

Dr. Grossman: Since 1991, we have worked on several thousand homeless patients and we've done just over two million dollars worth of dental work. I was thrilled with the contribution, but then thought, "I wonder if it can replicate this and get more of 'me' out there so that it's not just me helping the homeless with their teeth."

So I go to dental conferences where my dental colleagues are and I ask for the podium for three minutes to make an appeal. "Who is willing to volunteer one hour a month?" And, inevitably, I get dozens and dozens of dentists saying "okay." I realized that if I asked for something so nominal, that'd get a lot of people.

The Playa Wire: Do you have any memorable stories or patients?

Dr. Grossman: Four years ago a homeless patient was referred to me by the Claire Foundation, a sober living facility in Santa Monica. I got him in the chair, his name is John. I've got my hands in his mouth; I'm working on him and I'm talking to my dental assistant Jennifer about how I'm going to be pouring cement at my house.

John asks, "Do you need a hand pouring that cement?" So I give him my address. Sure enough, the next day he shows up. I showed him the steps I wanted to pour and the two hundred pounds of cement that I bought. He asked for one hundred bucks to go get some supplies. He comes back later with two thousand pounds of cement.

I had absolutely no clue how much I needed or how to do it. He kept saying, "Doc, why don't you put on a pot of coffee, I'll do it." They were the most beautiful steps I have ever seen, mine would not have come close.

John tells me how he had a very successful construction company, but work totally took over his life, 18 to 20 hours a day, because the money motivated him. The next thing he knows, his wife leaves a note on the refrigerator saying, "This is not what I signed up for. I want a relationship, not a workaholic." She and his 2-year-old son were gone. He looked for them, but had no success.

So he started using drugs to get rid of the pain and stopped showing up to work because the drugs took over. He lost his company and house. Then he was on the streets for fifteen years. He had a major heart attack and that was his wake up call to become sober.

Today, we are the best of friends, he moved into my house for two years and rebuilt our whole house, room-by-room, and maintained his sobriety. I got him paying taxes, found his ex-wife and reunited him with his kid who is now 17-years-old. I flew his kid out here as a surprise. His son and I are very close; he flies out every summer to visit his dad.

The Playa Wire: How did you start working with foster children?

Well, this homeless guy, John, his sister's best friend, Tina, is Sharon Stone's assistant. His sister happens to tell this story to Tina who tells this story to Sharon Stone. I get a phone call on my cell phone from Sharon Stone; I didn't believe it was she.

She says, "Dr. Grossman, my name is Sharon Stone, perhaps you've heard of me." I figured one of my buddies might be doing a practical joke. I say, "How can I help you?" And Sharon says, "I got your number from John." I have some celebrity patients and I'm thinking she means John Travolta, but she's talking about John, the homeless guy. Now, what are the odds of a homeless guy connecting me to a famous celebrity?

Sharon tells me, "I have a non-profit, called Planet Hope, perhaps you have heard of it? We send foster children to summer camp. At the camp, we have arts and crafts; we have the UGG company give them new shoes. We have UCLA give them medical exams and vaccinations. I need a dentist and I'm wondering if your program could help?"

So every summer I go to their camp and I'm the dentist to hundreds and hundreds of foster kids. That's how Homeless Not Toothless started branching out to kids.

The Playa Wire: You're building a medical and dental facility for foster care kids, how did this come about?

Dr. Grossman: Last year I get a phone call from Dr. Charles Sophy, the medical director of DCFS (Department of Children and Family Services), he runs foster care in Los Angeles County. He says, "I got your number from Sharon Stone. I've got a problem, the state of California is broke and they cut out dental care for foster kids. So now I have all these foster children who don't have dental care. I need to build a dental facility and Sharon said you could help."

I asked, "How many kids are we talking?" He said, "About twenty thousand." I answer, "You want me to build a dental facility for 20 thousand kids? That's a big undertaking!"

So I put thousands of hours into devising how this clinic would work. I came up with a five million dollar proposal. For five million, I could build the building, supply equipment and hire staff.

We had a gala fundraiser in September in 2009 and honored Sharon Stone for her philanthropic work. William Macy gave the award to her. Felicity Huffman, Larry King, his wife Shawna King, did a duet with Willie Nelson. Antwone Fisher was honored because he is a foster care kid who became a successful director. As a result of that fundraiser, we only have a million dollars to go, and this in the worst economy ever.

The Playa Wire: Where will the dental facility be?

Dr. Grossman: The building is in El Monte, ten miles east of downtown Los Angeles. We chose El Monte because it happens to be the geographic center of foster care families in Los Angeles County. The right side of the building will be for medical exams and the left side will be for dental exams. The medical exam side opened twelve weeks ago.

The dental side was gutted, painted and floored, but the rooms are bare. We need to raise about one hundred thousand dollars for the last pieces of equipment. We also need to raise nine hundred thousand dollars for staffing and supplies to keep the project up and running for the next 2-3 years. We are so darn close. And to think the foster care clinic got started because of Sharon Stone and because of a homeless patient that I treated, that's the wildest, craziest story.

The Playa Wire: Do you have any other goals after the clinic is built?

Dr. Grossman: Many years ago I had a business partner, outside of dentistry. At a private dinner I had with him, he told me a story. He met with Martin Luther King Jr. and Ghandi on two separate occasions. He asked them both the same question, "If you could live your life over again, what would you do differently?"

They both gave him the same answer, independent of one another. They both said they would have "dreamed bigger." So this business mentor turned to me and asked, "So Jay what is your dream?"

I said, "I'm going to end homelessness."

And I've been working on that for twenty years. And I'm thrilled that I've got to help thousands of people who are no longer homeless. They've been able to get jobs, become sober and have a life of integrity. I have only started. I'm going to take this model and replicate it throughout the United States. So that's my dream.

If you would like to be part of this dream and contribute to the

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