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Arlington dental nonprofit grew large under retiring director

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ARLINGTON -- When Sally Hopper signed on as executive director of Dental Health Arlington in 1994, the new organization was pretty simple: help low-income people get the care they need for dental problems.

Sixteen years later, as she prepares to retire, it has accomplished that and much more.

The clinic, at 210 N. East St., sees about 2,500 patients a year. They pay 25 to 30 percent of the normal cost for dental care. The clinic serves 9,000 children a year through its school-based program Sealing Molars Improves the Life of Every Student, or has grown from \$45,000 to almost \$500,000 a year.

Though Hopper is quick to point out that it has been a team effort, supporters say her energy and leadership have been key to the success.

"She has indeed been a blessing for Dental Health. Were it not for her, I don't know where we would be," said Ruby O'Connell, a board member since the organization's founding. "She's just a born leader."

Driven personality

Hopper, 62, had just completed a term as president of the Junior League of Arlington in 1994 when she was looking for an executive director. Dental Health had grown out of a United Way of Tarrant County needs assessment that called for low-cost dental care in the city, Hopper said.

Hopper's driven personality and experience coordinating volunteers and fundraising at the Junior League made the need for a director clear.

"You could torture me by tying me to a chair and making me sit and watch TV," she said. "I would much rather be too busy to watch TV."

Initially, Hopper was the only full-time employee. The organization's offices were in the Junior League building, and then in a building in Arlington. Dental Health has since added a staff of 11 others, including two part-time dentists and five dental assistants. Dental Health moved into its own building in central Arlington.

Volunteer dental professionals and students from the Baylor College of Dentistry and the hygienist programs at Texas State University and Tarrant County College also provide care, she said.

Fundraising efforts

A big part of Hopper's job has been fundraising.

The clinic can provide low-cost care because of grants, government funds and donations, she said.

She also enjoys day-to-day activity, like seeing children learn about dental hygiene and watching older people celebrate their birthdays.

"I've had the most wonderful group of dental people throughout the years to help me learn about dentistry," said Hopper. She worked at an elementary school in Grand Prairie before taking 12 years off to raise her two sons. "I now speak it, but I still can't do it."

The board has named April Harris, assistant director for the past year, as Hopper's successor. Hopper will leave at the end of the year. She said she wants to travel with her husband, Bill, who retired from the Dallas County adult probation department three years ago.