Dr. Norma Fox
Cosmetic Family Dentistry & General Orthodontics
Consistency in Excellence : Trust : Caring

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Dr. Norma Fox
Caring and Conservation Combine
By Peg Silloway

Exterior of Dr. Fox’s office

Is this a dental office? It’s a valid question when you enter Dr. Norma Fox’s Gentle Dental-Care Relaxation Clinique in Silver Spring, where beautiful smiles begin. For instance, what do sea turtles have to do with dentistry? They’re right there on the etched glass doors as you enter. They are in the carpet pattern, creating a whimsical path through the office. And they are clearly important to the warm, energetic dentist who greets you with a broad smile and enthusiasm. For that matter, why is “Spa” part of her practice? You will soon understand.

Dr. Fox’s sea turtle-inspired logo is etched into her front door.

The waiting area that also features sea turtles, which inspired Dr. Fox at a young age.

EARLY LEARNING IN SERVICE TO OTHERS
As a West Indian native of Jamaica, W.I., Norma Fox grew up in two prominent cities of North St. Andrew (Kingston) and Ocho Rios (Eight Rivers) where she attended the Iona Presbyterian Private School. The campus of green, lush grounds overlooked the blue-green Caribbean Sea and Beach Resort where some scenes from the James Bond movie, “Live and Let Die” were filmed. It was an idyllic place for her formative childhood.

At Iona, she learned responsibility and kindness, and a selflessness that reinforced what she saw at home in her parents’ way of giving of themselves to others. She and siblings were taught that “only our best was good enough,” and that they should always “strive for academic excellence because education opens doors.” During her childhood years, it was clear that Norma learned these lessons well. As president of Iona school 4H-Service Club, she helped to host international Summer Christian Camps where she met student-peers from America and Europe. The service club also taught her to be resourceful. One year the group planned a volunteer mission to the neighboring island of Grand Cayman to work with other high school peers. Any members who wanted to go had to earn the money for the trip themselves; their parents could not pay for them. So the future Dr. Fox engineered a cake sale fund-raiser, baking cakes and selling them during lunch-break at school, and earned enough to pay for her entire trip. On that trip, her 4-H club joined other club members in building a church school facility that would house summer camps where children could learn art and craft skills.

THE BEGINNING OF A PASSION
The adventure to Grand Cayman was her first international charitable mission trip and she learned two important lessons: she learned there was nothing she could not do for herself, and she learned that when you get outside of your own country and look
around, that people are just like you. But the trip was also the start of rekindling a life-long interest for the young woman. It was there that she learned about the sea turtle as an endangered species, and efforts such as a sea turtle farm where hatchlings were being raised to later be released into the ocean with the hope of restoring their numbers and avoiding extinction.

This was not her first encounter with sea turtles. As a child growing up in Ocho Rios - where sea turtles were then common - she often went swimming at the nearby Turtle Beach Resort that was a natural nesting site for the sea turtles. One warm summer night, Norma Fox swam alongside a green turtle and was immediately enthralled. “To look at a turtle looking back at me, it was absolutely fascinating,” she recalls. Sadly, as more and more tourist cruise ships visited Jamaica; pollution, oil spills, and artificial lighting created conditions that were unfit for turtle survival in that area. But for her, a life-long connection with sea turtles and conservation had begun.

CHOOSING A PATH

During high school in Jamaica, on Fridays the students visited professional offices to help them choose their future careers. From these visits, Dr. Fox thought she would become a doctor or perhaps a medical technician. She was already a good student – an honor student, in fact. She earned a scholaristic scholarship from the Presbyterian Church Foundation to study in America, and so came to this country to pursue university education. Throughout her university years, the Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland and Minneapolis, Minnesota were her strong supporters, both spiritually and financially.

Her first degree was in microbiology, and she worked at the University of Maryland Hospital anesthesiology lab doing research. Though the work was fascinating, she began to realize that medical technology or medicine might not be the best choices. First, the years required to become a research physician meant that she was a long way from actually practicing, and just as importantly, she realized that she needed to interact with people more than research would allow.

She began to review her options and talked to dental students at the University of Maryland. When she learned that they had a summer-student mission program, Dr. Fox decided on the dental field as her destination. At first, she thought being a dental hygienist would be a choice to preview the dental career path and so she went to dental hygiene school and became certified. But before long, she wanted to do more, and was inspired by Dr. Kenneth Langfield, her then employer and mentor. Soon she realized that the practice of dentistry would be flexible and would allow the adventure of travel volunteer missions anywhere. An aunt of hers who practices in Jamaica, W. I. had gone to dental school in the U.S., and that helped influence Dr. Fox’s decision, and so she enrolled in the University of Maryland at Baltimore City, Baltimore College of Dental Surgery.

Dr. Fox as a college student

Dr. Fox and her niece who’s following in her footsteps to become a dentist.
DREAMS INTO REALITY

To family and very close friends, Dr. Fox is known as “the dreamer.” It was during her pre-dental undergraduate studies that she had a vision of managing her dental practice. She didn’t say much about it, but remained focused on that vision. After dental school graduation, she did not follow the usual path of most colleagues by pursuing a contracted dental associate position. Instead, she practiced as a doctor-per-diem (free-lance dentistry). This choice allowed her to experience the practice of dentistry in different office management styles and different patient care delivery settings. She learned and studied taking from the best she had seen to create her unique philosophy and style of delivery of a holistic dental-health care approach. In 2001, Dr. Fox bought a 60-year-old dental practice with a generational family patient base. Seven years later, after getting to know her family of patients, she decided it was time to design a more modern facility in a setting that would reflect her own style of health care delivery and philosophy.

The search for the right location took more than a year, and the design was influenced greatly by the patients whom she had grown to know and appreciate. Their opinions were so valued that Dr. Fox sought their input through an office survey. After all, the new office would be theirs as much hers. Instead of choosing one of the usual commercial dental office contractors, she elected to create the new office she envisioned by working with a home builder. In combining her interior design concepts with the builder’s skills and the efforts of several dental equipment companies, the new office became a reality.
A NEW HOME FOR AN ESTABLISHED PRACTICE

The result is an environment that greets you as you enter through the tinted logo glass doors. There is a warm, home-like feeling in the curved stone half-wall that defines the reception and waiting areas. On one wall is a digital plasma (LCD) aquarium with a calming view of the coral ocean floor and aquatic echo, providing the serene welcome of a spa retreat. The soft, calming lilac painted walls and comfortable home-like furnishings of dark wood draw your eyes immediately to the carpet with the sea turtle pattern. The reception area accented wall-papered back wall includes a unique framed glass panel with an inscription of the practice philosophy: “CONSISTENCY IN EXCELLENCE : TRUST : CARING”. The waiting area also includes a glass-front refrigerator with logoed (sea turtle, of course) bottled alkaline water to provide ideal hydration for hot summer days. And over in one corner is a children’s nook and play area with a Disney feel to distract young patients from any preconceived dental fears and to comfort anxious parents. The cozy waiting area is clean, neat, and previews the rest of this well organized office. The entire impression is that families, neighbors, and friends are valued here.

The whimsical turtle patterns that lead to her relaxation spa.

The treatment area is flooded with natural light through semi-circular half-wall windows that look out onto Woodside Park. When you walk through the office you feel the comfort and openness that light provides within a compact and efficient workspace that has five treatment rooms in adjoining areas plus one is separately enclosed for those who require a bit more privacy. Follow the inlaid-turtle carpet down the hall around a bend and you’ll find a Relaxation Wellness Spa. The idea of incorporating a spa with a dental practice is testimony that Dr. Fox listens to her patients. For years she heard complaints of not only day-to-day stressful lives, but also the symptoms resulting from bruxism (teeth grinding). Patients are under so much daily pressure that they find it hard to turn off their cell phones and Blackberries, even for the short time they are at the dentist’s office. When planning the new office, Dr. Fox looked for ways to treat their stress in a positive and preventive way.

The spa design includes dimmed tray-ceiling lighting, aromatherapy candles and bamboo accessory wall lights. Here patients may come to escape for a little peace and quiet from their busy day, with music of soft instrumental melodies that create the perfect background for a relaxing rejuvenation experience. The centerpiece of this experience is the Ceragem Automatic Thermal Massage bed, chosen for its combination of elements from
several traditional Eastern therapies including acupressure effect, deep finger-pressure massage, heat of moxibustion therapy, and far-infrared rays of Asian Jade effect. This barefoot, fully clothed, massage experience is available to all patients before or after treatment.

Unconventional? Perhaps. But Dr. Fox believes in the holistic concept of medicine based upon the well-being of the whole human body rather than implying that disease of any one part of the body - such as the oral cavity - is separate from the rest. Her goal is complete wellness, and that requires seeing the person as a combination of systems that work together and not just as a mouth attached to a body. “They say that our eyes are the windows to the soul. Well, the mouth is the window to health,” says Dr. Fox.

THE WHOLE WORLD APPROACH

Dr. Fox’s whole world approach extends to her staff who come from El Salvador, Ecuador, Peru, Thailand, Vietnam, Jamaica and Trinidad. When you enter the office, you are greeted with confidence and warmth by someone who has worked with Dr. Fox for many years, and who embodies the relationship building philosophy that runs through the entire practice. Dental assistants Nolvia Escobar and Monpimarn “Tik” Laibson, receptionist Donna Talbot-Paul and Katherine Velasquez, hygienist Lily Nguyen, RDH, and associate dentist Santiago Rueda, DDS; all contribute to the success of this unique and multilingual practice (English, Spanish, French and Thai). As Dr. Rueda says, “It is a joy to be part of her practice, where top notch dentistry is performed in such a welcoming environment. She has inspired me to be organized and perform at a level of dental care delivery above average.” Her participation in all aspects of office duties sets the tone for teamwork as the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results.
Dr. Fox always seeks the optimal treatment for her patients. Here, “optimal” means not necessarily the only or the preferred treatment; it means the best combination treatment plan given the individual patient’s needs at the given time. When Dr. Fox presents a treatment plan, she stresses to the patient there’s no need to be over-whelmed. The planned treatment is comprehensive and her team will work to take the process a stage at a time, treating priorities and individualizing the plan to the patient’s comfort as treatment proceeds. The purpose is always to determine the best goals for each patient whether it takes weeks or years to bring a patient to optimal health. All patients and staff are treated with concern and being aware of what’s going on with respect and empathy. She expects visitors, whomever they are, to be greeted, respected and appreciated.

In the waiting area there is a poster: “KNOWLEDGE: One’s mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original dimensions” by Oliver Wendell Holmes. That statement reflects one belief central to Dr. Fox’s success, as she and her staff participate in continued education to learn advanced techniques that move her practice into the twenty-first century with state of the art equipment and treatment techniques. Dr. Fox’s Gentle Dental-care Relaxation Clinique, where beautiful smiles begin provides an array of modern technology which includes dental chairs with built-in soft ergosooth message feature, overhead audio-video monitors for dental education or movies, and headphone easy listening music to drown out high-pitch hand drill sounds. She has created a website (www.ComfortSmiles4U.com) for easy access to dental health education and newly available treatment options. New patients can also download dental forms to complete ahead of time so their first appointment goes smoothly.

A key factor in Dr. Fox’s philosophy of excellence in caring is how thorough she performs comprehensive exams with digital x-rays (90% reduced radiation) of exploratory capability, digital diagnostic photography, and cancer screening with referral for biopsy if tissue abnormalities are found. She’s very attentive and listens to her patients’ chief complaints to develop and customize their optimal treatment. Patients are encouraged to view audio-visual dental education aids because she believes dental knowledge helps motivate patient treatment compliance in home co-therapy for better results and treatment success.

Building relationship with her patients is a long-term and rewarding part of her practice. Dr. Fox’s commitment to her patients reaches into her personal life to the extent that she visits very ill patients who are on oxygen for breathing as well as others who cannot leave their homes. And on occasion, she visits them with a portable dental-care kit to perform denture repairs and adjustments when they cannot visit her office.

SERVICE TO OTHERS, NEAR AND FAR

It might sound as if dentistry at her office in Silver Spring consumes all of Dr. Fox’s time, but not so. Volunteerism, both at home and in foreign lands, is an essential part of her life. During her junior year, as president of the American Student
Dental Association at Howard Dental School, she organized a group of twelve classmates and four professors for a dental mission to villages in Westmoreland of her homeland, Jamaica W.I. The gratitude of her country folk was most rewarding. She recalls, “It was one of my proudest moments of accomplishment; then and there I knew I had found my passion.” The mission created such an impact for fellow students that Howard Dental School has continued the project annually.

Dr. Fox’s dental volunteerism did not end at Howard but has continued throughout her career. In 1995, she began to volunteer her services in General Dentistry at the Catholic Spanish Dental Clinic in Washington, DC, a center of the Catholic Charity Foundation. During the summer of 1998, she volunteered her time with the English Department at the University of Maryland College Park as an English-speaking partner to Japanese and French students learning to master their English communication skills. In 2000, she was a consulting dentist for the “Mother and Child” dental care program at the Montgomery County Dental Clinic in Rockville, MD. She also organized a Dental Education Program for the elementary school age children of Montgomery County. Today she has adopted five schools in Silver Spring near her private dental practice community. During Dental Health month each February, she visits these schools with dental care kits and classroom presentation on dental health. The teachers and children are always as happy to see her as she looks forward to visiting them each year.

A PASSION REKINDLED

Several years after completing dental school and feeling adventurous, Dr. Fox saw a program on the Discovery channel about a volunteer group on a mission trip to Tortuguero, Costa Rica. She immediately called the Caribbean Conservation Corporation (CCC) and began to learn more about Dr. Archie Carr and his sea turtle conservation program of 1959. As Dr. Fox explains, “The CCC is a conservation group whose mission is to ensure the survival of the sea turtles within the wider Caribbean basin and Atlantic through research advocacy and education. I chose sea turtles as a focus of caring for the planet Earth through conservation efforts in part because these ancient creatures, who shared existence with dinosaurs, are among the most important indicators of the health of the world’s marine and coastal ecosystems.” And as a CCC member she shares the belief “that whether sea turtles ultimately vanish from the planet or whether they remain a wild and thriving part of the natural world, will speak volumes about the general health of the planet and the ability of humans to sustainable coexist with the diversity of life on earth”. 

Dr. Fox hosting the first volunteer dental student outreach mission in Jamica, W.I. (1993).

Dr. Fox supporting and working with the Boy Scouts of America.

Dr. Fox volunteers at the Catholic Dental Clinic
Dr. Fox has been working with the Spanish Catholic Center for over 10 years.

Dr. Fox in Thailand

Dr. Fox on a mission of love in Thailand

Dr. Fox working on a patient in Thailand
The real connection with sea turtles came when Dr. Fox visited Tortuguero as a volunteer at Dr. Carr’s sea turtle research and nesting camp. You can hear her excitement when she says, “Turtuguero provided a wonderful and overwhelming experience.” It is her desire and her hope to return to Turtuguero village someday with a dental team to provide dental care to the local village children, most of whom have never seen a dentist.

**A LIFE STYLE OF GIVING**

After Dr. Fox’s return from the Turtuguero Sea Turtle mission, and with rekindled enthusiasm for international volunteerism, she partnered with a former dental school colleague to organize a dental mission to Manasraung, Northern Thailand. In 2004 and 2005, she co-hosted humanitarian missions into the remote Manasraung village schools of the native Karen Tribes. In 2006, she volunteered as a dental consultant to “Vision on Africa,” an organization for HIV mothers and orphans in Ethiopia, North Africa. Though she did not visit the country due to an untimely political unrest, she was able to ship dental care kits to the facility. One of Dr. Fox’s goals for the future is to implement dental missions to the region, and also to Morocco, Turkey and Egypt.

To implement these North African missions, she has begun to organize a not-for-profit foundation, Save a Kid’s Smile (SAKS)/One Smile…One People. Her goal for this foundation is to establish a group that is committed to research, habitat protection, public education, community outreach, networking, and advocacy as its basic tools. She says, “A child is of same importance as anywhere in the world. My wish is that all children have healthy smiles.” In the fall of 2009, she hopes to join...
an already established organization, Global Humanitarian Expeditions, on missions to dental clinics in Kathmandu, Nepal and Ladakh, India.

Dr. Fox’s activities may seem extremely ambitious, but because of her flexible lifestyle and excellent organizational skills, most events are planned seasonally. Activities with family and friends usually occur around Christmas and in the summer by either horse-back riding, golfing, cycling, rock-climbing or water sports. Volunteer missions are planned during the fall and winter seasons when her dental practice is not quite as busy; and in the spring she schedules the dental health programs for local schools.

Life is a journey, Dr. Fox believes, that should include service of selflessness and goodwill to our neighbors of both global and local communities. In her office you will see the sign “What wisdom can you find that is greater than kindness?” She remembers her first years here in the United States of America and the many kindnesses that her friends and strangers have shown her. She says, “I have been blessed in many ways and these friendship and mission experiences have humbled me and helped me to grow spiritually. I am grateful and appreciative of these blessings and opportunities.” She strongly believes that “to whom much is given, much is expected” as the guiding passion in giving and sharing to make a difference in the lives of others less fortunate. It is her belief that, “We are one people of one world, and for each life that I touch, I believe will touch another’s life and in turn touch another’s, until who knows where or in what far place my touch will be felt? It is in planting the seed of giving that service and sharing grow to make a difference in the world. My vision extends far and beyond what I can physically touch, and has never been clearer. Having a vision means that I can see clearly beyond the horizon and as close as the beat of my heart. Possibility becomes reality when you put into action your vision, and it is only then that the spiritual vibrations are able to soar through you, providing the energy and the means to make your vision your realization. For, what lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us.”

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