

A Whale of an Effort

The story of two surfer dentists, a mobile clinic
and a vision for El Salvador

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When Dr. John Leland began doing volunteer dentistry in El Salvador in 2009, he wasn't looking for a lifetime commitment. He was looking for a "right break."

The Houston native, who grew up surfing, has practiced dentistry for 36 years in a thoroughly landlocked city—San Antonio. So to indulge his craves for waves, Leland traveled frequently to Hawaii, Costa Rica and Panama, and scoured the Internet to discover other promising, more out-of-the-way surf spots. One such place was Playa El Cuco in southeast El Salvador, a beach known for having a consistent, smooth wave that breaks to the right.

The beauty of the beach community belies the fact that its residents are poor, many making a simple living selling food, or fishing in small boats. And few can easily afford—or sometimes even locate—a dentist. So Leland decided to do some volunteer dentistry on his vacation.

Although the hotel staff at Azul Surf Club hotel knew of his plans, they nonetheless were amazed to see him arrive with an air compressor, instruments and "everything you need to do dentistry except a chair," he said. Instead, he used

a beach chair. He treated 50 patients that week, and realized at some point that he was doing more dentistry than surfing. But that didn't bother him. In fact, while walking along the beach with his wife one afternoon, he had a realization. "I thought, 'This is it. This is where I am supposed to be helping,'" he said.

Envisioning "The Whale"

Not long after Leland's visit, Salvadoran dentist Dr. Oscar Carranza was surfing when he heard from an American tourist about the "surfer dentist" in El Cuco.

"He sounded like a really good guy who had a lot in common with me," Carranza said, so he tracked down Leland's email address and the two established contact. Although a generation apart in age, both men were motivated by strong faith-based beliefs in the importance of helping the poor—and both loved surfing, fishing and dentistry.

Carranza worked as a dentist for El Salvador's public utility and practiced at his own clinic in the afternoons. Leland continued to practice in San

by Jennie Erin Smith

Jennie Erin Smith is a freelance journalist based in McAllen, Texas. She writes frequently on health and science for *Frontline Medical News*, *The Wall Street Journal*,



The New Yorker and other publications, and is author of *Stolen World* (Crown 2011), a nonfiction book about animal smuggling. Ms. Smith lived in El Salvador from 2013-2014, working alongside her husband, Seth Robbins, also a journalist. While in San Salvador, the two were patients at Dr. Carranza's private dental practice. Dr. Carranza personally introduced them to Dr. Leland and "The Whale."

*Dr. John Leland, Dr. Jeremy Leland, an oral surgeon practicing in Georgetown, Texas, and
and Dr. Oscar Carranza present The Whale at a conference in San Salvador, El Salvador.*



Antonio, but El Salvador—and the needs of its people—never left his mind.

By the time the two met face to face in 2012, they'd been sharing ideas for nearly two years, and they'd hatched an ambitious plan that would take them another two years—and many frustrations and setbacks—to finally put into action.

They called their plan “The Whale” (*La Ballena* in Spanish).

The wheel deal

Built in 1993 by the U.S. Navy, The Whale was a fully equipped mobile dental clinic that was scheduled to be decommissioned. After a friend advised Leland of an online government auction, he warned his wife about the potential of a big charge to their bank account.

“I called my wife and said, ‘Hey, I’m spending a little money today,’” he said. A few clicks and \$10,000 later, the mobile clinic was his.

It was in good condition overall, with two top-quality chairs and great dental equipment, but had a dated interior.

“The laminate on the cabinets was that ’90s mauve color,” Leland recalled. He had it driven from Arkansas to his home in Texas, where he began to restore it, replacing the cabinets, floors, walls and ceiling.



“I’m a firm believer in treating all people with respect. I’ve never had to turn anyone away ... but sometimes they’ve had to wait a long time.” – Dr. John Leland

In 2013, when it was finally ready for action, Leland drove The Whale to Houston and put it on a ship bound for Guatemala. From there, it was driven across the border to El Salvador, where ... it sat in customs for six months.

“It was a military vehicle with no [vehicle identification number],” Leland said. “The customs officials had no idea what to do.” Eventually they grew tired of dealing with it and released it. Carranza then parked it in a church lot in San Salvador.

A home base

Before the dentists could realize their dream of a mobile clinic to treat some of the poorest and most isolated people in El Salvador, more steps needed to be taken.

They had to set up a charitable foundation in the U.S. and a parallel nonprofit in El Salvador, and acquire all necessary permits. Leland also had to find a way to recruit volunteers and get

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Top: An ox cart in El Cuco, El Salvador. Center: The Whale contains the comforts of home. Bottom: Few residents of El Salvador can afford quality dental care, so Dr. John Leland made it his mission to treat as many patients as he could. By setting up parallel charitable foundations in the United States and El Salvador, Leland and Salvadoran dentist Oscar Carranza (with patient, below) were able to acquire all necessary permits to operate a mobile dental clinic they call The Whale.



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1. Corimi DDS, MAGD, John C. The Catapult Group presents its review on this unique, protective, remineralizing and moisture-enhancing preventive treatment gel, Dental Product Report, 2015, October, Issue 10 Vol. 9 68-69/ Enamelon® United States Patent Numbers: US 5,993,784, US 5,711,936, US 5,651,959 and other patents pending. Made in U.S.A. / Ultramulsion® is a registered trademark of WhiteHill Oral Technologies, Inc.



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The Whale to a permanent home where it could be maintained when not on the road.

“I thought of the project as not impossible, but hard to sustain,” Carranza said. “It was a real mess getting it set up—and I’m a dentist, not a master of administration who knows how to run a foundation. But like Dr. Leland, I love helping people with few or no resources, and that’s what motivates me.”

Leland had been eyeing a piece of beachfront property on Las Flores, a secluded beach next to El Cuco, as a potential base of operations for dental outreach work. Fortunately, its owners wanted to part with it for cash in order to improve a nearby hotel, and ground was broken on what eventually would be the headquarters of Leland Dental Charities and Fundasonrisas.

A wave of volunteers

During all of his trips back and forth, Leland had never felt unsafe in El Salvador, which is partly why he felt safe asking his fellow dentists to join the effort. In 2014 the first volunteers arrived: four surfer dentists from Hawaii, South Carolina and Oregon who had been friends since dental school. The volunteers surfed in the morning, then treated patients the rest of the day alongside Leland and Carranza.

“We’d schedule [appointments] based on the tide, the waves and the patients’ schedules,” Leland said.

One stipulation is that volunteers must practice only the best dentistry while in El Salvador, never cutting corners. That means using top-grade materials and seeing no more than 16 patients a



“We have the best equipment, and we have the patients. What we need is the cash to keep [the mobile clinic] in use.” – Dr. Oscar Carranza

day—fewer, if possible. “I’m a firm believer in treating all people with respect,” he said. “I’ve never had to turn anyone away ... but sometimes they’ve had to wait a long time.”

Within months, four more groups had come to El Salvador. Leland and Carranza asked the heads of rural communities if they could bring in The Whale, and were always welcomed. The dentists also brought on El Cuco native Karla Salmeron, a dental assistant and educator who’s now a vital part of the team (and looks after The Whale when it’s not in use).

Keeping things rolling

Carranza’s current focus is keeping The Whale moving around El Salvador between visits from Leland and his volunteers, and making it available to other nonprofit groups aware of its mission.

“I’d love to have it in use every single day,” he said.

But keeping both the clinic and the vehicle well maintained is a lot of work. When a group of Canadian volunteers recently tried to take The Whale to an orphanage, the vehicle turned out to be too heavy for the steep, unpaved roads, and some expensive repairs were needed. “We realized then that The Whale needs to be kept on paved, level ground and that folks will have to come down the hill to us,” Leland said.

“Volunteers bring tons of materials,” Carranza said, “but we have to hire good drivers, and the maintenance is constant. We have the best equipment, and we have the patients. What we need is the cash to keep it in use.”

In March, Carranza and Leland co-hosted a conference in San Salvador to generate local interest in their work. Its purpose was not only to raise money and awareness in the Salvadoran dental community, but also to increase volunteerism among local dentists who can help sustain the outreach work and the keep The Whale in motion.

The conference attracted local and international speakers, including Dr. Lucas Miralda, dean of the dental school at the

Evangelical University of El Salvador, who has supported the project since its inception, and Dr. Jeremy Leland, an oral surgeon practicing in Georgetown, Texas (and Dr. Leland’s son). Of the 120 attendees—dentists, hygienists and students—many came to learn specifically about The Whale. “The concept of the vehicular clinic was what brought them in,” Carranza said. People wanted to see it, he added, and learn how to make The Whale work for their own short-term projects.

Joining the effort

Dental volunteers from the U.S., Canada and El Salvador are essential to the effort’s success. The program welcomes groups of between two and six dentists and dental assistants, along with their families. Volunteers don’t have to love surfing, fishing, fresh seafood or beautiful beaches—they just need to bring good skills, open hearts and a desire to help others.

For more information about this not-for-profit mobile dentistry program, go to dentalvolunteerelsalvador.org. ■



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