



22 January 2021

My name is David E. McCracken and I want to introduce you to the **Veteran Smiles Foundation (VSF)**. It was established in 2020 as a public charity designed to provide education and financial support to North Carolina veterans in need of improved dental health. Why did I do that? Unfortunately, most veterans do not qualify for dental care from the Veterans Administration. Only about 10% do qualify; most are 100% disabled.

I became aware of this 'gap' through my involvement with the Veterans Affairs Council in Haywood County, North Carolina. I am a retired U. S. Army officer and started a precursor organization in Western North Carolina with a three-year Pilot Study to help my fellow veterans with dental needs. The Pilot Study for this endeavor started in 2018 with my original non-profit organization, Smoky Mountain Outreach Foundation (SMOF), and partnered closely with a dental clinic in Sylva, NC. That clinic is one of eight Community Service Learning Centers (CSLC) from the East Carolina University (ECU) School of Dental Medicine (SoDM). These CSLC's are located throughout the state in rural and under-resourced areas to train their dentists and also to provide a dental home for needy citizens in rural areas. SMOF, together with the Sylva ECU CSLC initiated ECU Smiles for Veterans as the flagship event of the broader VET SMILES initiative to provide a more comprehensive option to their special population of veterans needing dental care. ECU Smiles became an annual one-day event where all CSLC resources were dedicated to only veterans; while VET SMILES provided more extensive dental care needs such as crowns, partials, and even full sets of dentures.

The dental services provided by the CSLC's are offset by Medicaid, private dental insurance, and patient reimbursement, and they also work with uninsured patients. Many of the rural veteran population needed more help, so our SMOF group sought to provide additional funding to make up the difference. We received donations and three grants that were used for the Pilot Study. Over ninety veterans within just seven counties received much needed dental care they could not have obtained elsewhere.

Another primary stakeholder in this collaboration has been NC Serves, a part of America Serves. They are a robust organization offering a wide continuum of services to America's Veterans. NC Serves Western ensured our veterans were qualified and enrolled in all available programs, and also determined a reference point for financial need towards the dental services to be provided. A mutual agreement between the ECU SoDM and NC Serves also ensures the most reasonable cost for dental services.

The most important component of our effort has been our special veterans. They have showed up when asked, completed their due diligence, and fulfilled every task requested. We even asked them to give back to the program as they saw fit, and they have responded like the true patriots we all knew they would be.

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*Veteran Smiles is a 501c(3) public charity in NC.*



Two unexpected benefits surfaced during the Pilot Study.

- One private Dentist was motivated by the program and decided to offer his dental services pro bono to one veteran. The selected veteran eventually received much needed dentures that completely changed his life.
- Numerous veterans were not registered in their respective counties. We worked with NC Serves to serve as the catalyst to officially introduce them to their respective Veterans Service Offices, which opened up the wide array of both family support (NC Serves) and veteran's service support opportunities for them.

The Pilot Study ended in December 2020, and showed how such an innovative project can succeed, especially with the right partners on board. My original SMOF group was dissolved (due to the narrow seven county scope) and Veteran Smiles Foundation (VSF) was created. All remaining funds were transferred to the VSF and we are now intent to broaden the VET SMILES program statewide, using the eight ECU CSLCs network as the core sites for veterans to receive their dental care (adding one per year).

This will require more effort on all parties, and for the ultimate expansion of VSF support to all eight of ECU's CSLC statewide, more funding. We would like for this program to one day become self-sustaining through consistent grant funding and donations, coupled with the other financial resources utilized by the CSLC's. As Dean Chadwick of the ECU's SoDM (also a veteran) says, "we want our CSLC's to be the dental home for participating veterans."

The only way for this program to grow and thrive is through more funding and donations. I want to ensure every veteran can attain proper dental care. The VET SMILES program has proven it can work, but I need your help to keep it going and expand it.

VSF is now located in Wake Forest, NC and we are planning ECU Smiles for Veterans events in 2021 for Sylva, NC and also in Eastern NC at the Brunswick County ECU CSLC in Bolivia. **We need more partners to help fund the VET SMILES program.**

I would love to come share our story with you and your group. I have a briefing that tells our story and outlines our Pilot Study, and I must confess, it also 'emphasizes' the passion I have for this project. I will travel anywhere, anytime, to see this project grow.

We are working on our website but have news stories and various articles (one is enclosed) to give more information. Please let me know a time I could come talk.

Again, my name is (Colonel, Retired) David E. McCracken, VSF Founder.  
Contact me at [davide@vetsmiles.org](mailto:davide@vetsmiles.org) or 984.233.3350.

The principal consultant to VSF is (Lieutenant Colonel, Retired) Jesse A. McCorvey, at [jessea@vetsmiles.org](mailto:jessea@vetsmiles.org) or 984.233.3297.

*David E McCracken*

Enclosure ECU SoDM Article



Leigh Tabor, director of veterans services for Macon County, said her office receives inquiries about dental care on a regular basis, mostly since “veterans have to be 100 percent service-connected to Veterans Affairs in order to receive dental benefits, and that’s hard to get,” she said. “So dental care gets put on the back burner, which causes a domino effect of health problems.”

Tabor said ECU Smiles for Veterans was special because of the ECU dental school’s presence in the region. She said her office once helped a veteran who needed a heart catheterization but had an abscessed tooth days before the procedure was to be done. The CSLC–Sylva was able to see the patient and provide care so that he could eventually have the heart procedure and be on the road to better health, what Tabor called a “life-changer” for that veteran. “We’re so grateful to ECU for giving the space, providers and support staff,” she said. “There’s not another office like this one anywhere around here.”

Part of the School of Dental Medicine’s two-fold mission, in addition to providing oral health care for people in rural and underserved communities, is to transform North Carolina residents into the next generation of dentists for the state. ECU Smiles for Veterans gave several students an opportunity to see firsthand the importance and reward in providing dental care to special populations.

“Our vision of the school’s eight statewide community service learning centers included a mission to serve special populations who live in or near the rural communities,” Chadwick said. “ECU Smiles for Veterans is that mission come to life, a day set aside to serve those who have served for all of us.”

Fourth-year dental student Ashley Schofield said participating in ECU Smiles gave her a unique perspective on education and service. “Experiences like these are ones that help us remember why we chose the profession—to help and give back,” she said. “We are not only furthering our dental education and techniques, but also growing our connection with people in need and learning to be understanding, diversified and well-rounded.”

“For me, dentistry is all about service, and to be able to make these veterans feel important and appreciated is so meaningful,” she said. “ECU Smiles for Vets aligns with our school’s mission to serve the underserved, as many of these veterans do not have insurance and may not be able to afford the care they need.”

“East Carolina has an impact across the state, and that’s the footprint of the dental school; that’s the ‘fifth floor’ of Ross Hall,” Manga said. “Our involvement in the community is the overarching theme. ECU Smiles for Veterans enables students to have a better understanding of those who have stepped forward and served our country. Hopefully in the future they will also in turn take part in such a program to help veterans—or start one themselves.” Manga said he hopes ECU Smiles for Veterans becomes a regular event in the future.

Col. David McCracken, chair of Smoky Mountains Outreach Foundation, a major organizer of ECU Smiles, greeted each and every veteran as he or she walked through the doors. He cracked jokes and helped veterans fill out the paperwork that would not only help them get the dental care they needed but help them connect with other regional resources as well. “Filling out all this paperwork is just like it was when I was first going into the service,” one veteran laughed.

McCracken said seeing the veterans gather in one place for one purpose was satisfying because it is another step toward providing better all-around care to those who have served. “The goal is to improve oral health across this entire region,” he said. “Dental care is where there really is such great need.”

Janet Sadlon brought her husband from Franklin, N.C., to get several fillings and other dental procedures, and while she waited she talked with other veterans and exchanged stories about service and life. She said ECU Smiles brought out the best in not only those providing dental care but also in the veterans who found common ground with comrades sitting side by side in a waiting room.



## **School of Dental Medicine's CSLC–Sylva hosts inaugural ECU Smiles for Veterans event**

*ECU is dedicated not just to educating its dental students via hours in clinical simulation labs but also to connecting them to the community for real-world experience and giving back through events like the inaugural ECU Smiles for Veterans at the School of Dental Medicine Community Service Learning Center in Sylva on Thursday*

PUBLISHED NOV 19, 2018 BY SPAINE STEPHENS, ECU SCHOOL OF DENTAL MEDICINE

For Lloyd Holland, walking into the East Carolina University School of Dental Medicine's community service learning center in Sylva, N.C., felt like coming home all over again. Holland and about 40 other veterans from seven western North Carolina counties received dental care from students, residents and faculty from the School of Dental Medicine during the inaugural ECU Smiles for Veterans event on Thursday, Nov. 15.

"It means a lot to me to be here because it shows people actually want to help each other," said Holland, of Murphy, N.C. "In North Carolina, people just care more about each other, and this event shows that. It's hard for me to say what I feel, but it feels like a brick has been lifted off my back."

The School of Dental Medicine joined forces with several local veterans' organizations to provide dental care to veterans at no cost to them during this one-day event; other organizers included Smoky Mountains Outreach Foundation, NC Serves Western and county-based veterans services offices.

The veterans who received care at ECU Smiles were pre-screened in September at Smoky Mountain Veterans Stand Down, an event at which veterans are connected with a variety of resources from haircuts to blood pressure screenings to dental care. While local organizations provided two dental vans at the Stand Down event, about 60 veterans were identified as needing more extensive dental care than could be provided on site, so they were referred to the ECU Smiles event.

The majority of those veterans—who served in World War II, Korea, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan—were greeted Thursday in the CSLC–Sylva lobby by office staff, ECU School of Dental Medicine administrators and the faces of fellow veterans with whom they automatically felt ties that bind.

Throughout the day, Dr. Robert Manga, faculty director of CSLC–Sylva, and Dr. Michael Garvin, assistant faculty director, performed dental procedures on patients and oversaw the dental students and residents as they provided care. Both Manga and Garvin are veterans themselves, and ECU Smiles for Veterans was not only a way they could give back through their profession. It was personal. "As veterans, Dr. Garvin and I understand the sacrifices many of these men and women have made to serve our country," Manga said. "They served their country, and they deserve our thanks. This is one way we can thank them."

Dr. Greg Chadwick, dean of the School of Dental Medicine, and Dr. Rob Tempel, associate dean for extramural clinical practices—both dentists and veterans as well—talked with veterans during the event and emphasized the importance of the dental school's presence in the communities across the state where the CSLCs operate. "It has been our dream since day one that this dental school wouldn't be isolated to one place," Chadwick said. "Now we're able to provide services at the same time that we're educating our dental students. ECU Smiles for Veterans is an opportunity for the school to be able to contribute to our communities."

Tempel said the day's success was because of collaboration between the local organizations that go the extra mile for veterans and the Sylva CSLC, which is in a prime location to provide care to veterans and those in need in western North Carolina. "It's an honor to serve our veterans and partner with these great organizations," he said. "The clinic staff and community really came together to make the day successful."