



Expanding the Season of Hope

By Alexander Germanis



Mark Houska, DMD; Holly Houska, DMD; Aaron Michaels, DMD

As the sun slips away ever earlier in the day and the air hones a crisp, cold edge, it is undeniable the holiday season has settled upon us. For many, however, the twinkling of Christmas lights, the ringing of bells, and the otherwise comforting smells of home cooking do little to stem the tide of mounting stress and, even worse, depression and loneliness.

Fortunately, there are some who understand the secret to restoring the feelings of hope and goodwill to the season lie not in turning inward, but outward — to lose oneself in service to others and to give rather than receive.

That personal as well as professional philosophy is a cornerstone upon which Houska Dental Center in Bloomington was founded, and it is one they put into practice year round.

A basis in giving

Founding Houska Dental in 1989, Mark and Holly Houska have been striving to keep the spirit of giving and hope alive in their practice since before there even was a practice.

Meeting for the first time in dental school, Mark and Holly cultivated their love for one another throughout their four years of study while simultaneously cultivating a desire to serve others.

Together, they volunteered regularly at the Oasis Women's Shelter — a safe haven for victims of domestic violence. During that same time, the burgeoning couple provided free screenings for the Edwardsville, Illinois chapter of the Head Start program — a program that provides education, health, and nutrition aid to young children.

When the Houskas graduated from the Southern Illinois University School of Dental Medicine, they also received an award for their community health outreach and their time volunteering.

Although the recognition is appreciated, Holly and Mark do not feel it is necessary. Doing the work is “not about [getting] a pat on the back,” as Holly says. Instead, they simply want to provide a positive example of what giving of oneself can do. “Mark and I have made giving back a part of our professional and personal lives from the beginning of our careers,” she adds. “Helping those less fortunate is something we are passionate about. It is an integral part of who we are and of our philosophy of practice.”

Helping the helpless

While children tend to receive an extra helping of attention during the holidays, the Houskas realize how children need a steady stream of positive influence in their lives if they are to grow up strong, responsible members of society. “We have a passion for helping children and a strong sense of social responsibility,” Mark states. “Helping kids is of particular importance to us as they often have no means to help themselves, and we believe every child deserves a chance in life, deserves to have dreams and to have the opportunity to work toward fulfilling those dreams.”

In order to provide those opportunities, Mark and Holly have put their time, effort and skills into action in myriad ways.

It is no secret most children fear going to the dentist, so removing that stigma through education holds an important purpose for Houska Dental. Volunteering during National Children’s Dental Health Month, they give presentations in schools and at the Boys and Girls Club, host pre-school classes, and give Cub and Girl Scout troops tours of their dental offices. “We have also sponsored or donated dental materials to a large number of mission trips, school, and community outreach events,” Mark adds.

Practically since they started their practice, Mark and Holly have also been involved with the Baby Fold organization, providing pro-bono dental care, for which they have received the Baby Fold’s Community Partner Award.

But it is not all about dental health. The Houska Dental Center doctors and staff volunteer during the Boys and Girls Club holiday celebration and help sponsor their Be Great Breakfast fundraiser.

Mark points out there were even more ways to help the growing generation. “We have been involved with the Children’s Discovery Museum (CDM) since it was just a store front in Eastland Mall,” he explains. “Holly organized and chaired the committee that brought the McLean County Dental Society exhibit to the museum. She was on the board of directors for many years, was president of the Town of Normal CDM Foundation Board for two terms, and a member of the foundation board for six. We have sponsored many of the CDM’s events and programs and were charter donors to the capital campaign, which filled the museum with its original exhibits in the uptown location.”

Making connections that matter

“We made a conscious decision from the beginning to care for people as well as their dental needs,” Mark says. “Our team cares for the patients as individuals first and attend to their dental needs also. I think that is a bit of a different approach. We have relationships with our patients that are meaningful and go beyond dental treatment. That means a great deal to us and to our staff.”

One such interaction means a great deal to all those who work there. A few years ago, a patient of theirs and member of the reserves was called up and sent to Iraq. During his tour there, he was injured by a rocket-propelled grenade and subsequently



Schanda Butcher, Unit Director of the Boys & Girls Clubs, one of the many dedicated staff who serve member youth



The Houska Dental Team

spent a year in the medical center in Bethesda, unable to walk for a significant portion of that time. The staff at Houska Dental quickly put their philosophy of caring into practice. “We regularly sent him letters and boxes of pick-me-up gifts: a CD player with music, books on CD, reading materials, food treats, miscellaneous gifts, etc.,” Holly recalls.

Although the joy that comes from giving is its own reward, the dental team was given a gift in return that none of them will ever forget. “One day, completely unexpectedly, he came walking through the front door of our office,” Holly remembers. “He had been released and had just arrived back in Bloomington. He told us our office was his first stop upon returning. We were so honored that we were the people he wanted to see first!”

Others in the armed forces are remembered as well. As the holidays can be a particularly difficult time for those who serve overseas, Houska Dental organizes letter writing campaigns and Christmas present drives. A flag gifted to the practice from an “adopted air force squadron” hangs in the office as a thank you and as a reminder of those who give all they have to maintain our freedoms.

To give is to receive

The beauty and joy that comes from sacrifice — from giving of your time and of yourself — is that we often end up getting back more than what we give. For instance, Mark and Holly describe how their relationship with those they work with everyday has deepened as a result. “Volunteering draws us together in addi-

tional interactions, often quite different than our daily workplace interactions. We learn different facets of one another’s personalities and interests, which in turn makes our bond even stronger.”

Although it is made more evident during the cold, dark winter holiday season that there are so many in need, there are *always* those in need. “We have an ability to meet a small portion of that need,” Holly states, “and we feel both a desire and a responsibility to do so.”

“There is much egregiousness and ugliness in the world, but there is at least equal part goodness,” Holly continues. “If our focus can be on that goodness, perhaps it can overshadow the less-than-good. Too often, circumstances beyond one’s control can dictate one’s reality, and a helping hand and a kindness can make an incredible difference in such circumstances. No one should ever feel hopeless, and no one should ever feel invisible in our world. If our circumstance is such that we can help someone to not feel those things, then it is a gift to *us* to be able to help; we are all connected.”

**Houska Dental Center is located at
2433 Maloney Dr. in Bloomington. For more
information or to schedule an appointment,
call 309-662-9042 or visit them online at
www.HouskaDental.com.**