

2024

## How I (we!) got involved with treating those with special needs

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.ada.org/noda-news>

---

### Recommended Citation

(2024) "How I (we!) got involved with treating those with special needs," *NODA News*: Vol. 62: No. 6, Article 7.

Available at: <https://commons.ada.org/noda-news/vol62/iss6/7>

This Feature is brought to you for free and open access by the State & Local Dental Publications at ADACommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in NODA News by an authorized editor of ADACommons. For more information, please contact [commons@ada.org](mailto:commons@ada.org).

# How I (we!) got involved with treating those with special needs

by Frank Martello, D.D.S. & Kathy Martello

## Frank

It all started with me deciding to pursue a career in dentistry. I have no family members with special needs, but my parents taught me lessons in compassion. In my freshman year at Loyola University, Fr. John Mullahy, SJ, told the class that we were all given a special talent and it was our duty to recognize that talent and use it to help others. After getting a BS in biology at Loyola, I earned my DDS at LSU School of Dentistry in 1979.

It was at a play at Tulane Summer Lyric Theatre that Dr. Ralph Diaz, a friend's father, asked me if I would visit him the next week at the Dr. Hy Soboloff Center for Special Needs at Touro Infirmary. The Soboloff Center staff consisted of several orthopedists, a neurologist, and a pediatrician, as well as occupational and physical therapists. It was a one-stop shop for children with special needs and their families. I began volunteering there every Thursday morning in

1984. After several moves and the complete disruption of Hurricane Katrina, the physician members of the Soboloff Group disbanded. At this point I moved the dental clinic portion to the offices of United Cerebral Palsy of Greater New Orleans, in Kenner, LA, and have continued to treat patients with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) there ever since.

In 2021, we established an endowment of \$100,000 at LSUSD, named "The United Cerebral Palsy of Geater New Orleans and Dr. Frank Martello Conference and Education in Dentistry Fund." This is dedicated to educating dental students in the treatment of patients with special needs. I've also been blessed with my wife Kathy, who I met when I was a junior at LSUSD. She has assisted me at the UCPGNO clinic for many years now. We invite dental and hygiene students of all years as well as pre-dental students to visit and assist at the Clinic.

Other good news in 2021 – as

members of the Louisiana Dental Task Force, we rejoiced that Gov. John Bel Edwards signed Act 450 into law. The Act provides Medicaid dental coverage for adults 21 and over with I/DD. Before this, patients received *no* coverage until they turned 65, and then only for dentures. Patients with I/DD no longer need suffer 44 years of neglect.

Kathy and I give an annual lecture to first year dental students on the various ways that dental professionals can give back to society with those special talents we've been given. To me, the greatest gift we can give is not money or possessions but the gift of ourselves in helping others.

So many of our special needs patients have rewarded us with smiles – smiles that are free from pain, decay, and the discomfort caused by massive calculus build-up. (One patient thanked us for clearing out "the barnacles" from

*(Continued on page 12)*



*Pan Bellone, Cathy Hart, and Kathy Reed (later Martello) in the Ortho lab at LSUSD.*



*Kathy & Dr. Frank Martello with Kenny, the most effective non-verbal patient ever. And one of the cheeriest!*

## How I (we!) got involved with treating those with specials needs . . .

*(Continued from page 11)*

her lower anteriors. What an image!) Please consider giving some of your time and talents to help this often-neglected part of our community.

### Kathy

I actually started at LSUSD a few years before Frank – well, okay, as a patient in 1971. My mom would drive me to the campus, ending up in the old faculty parking lot. One day she pulled up in the corner spot, closest to the entrance, marked with a wooden sign that said RESERVED FOR THE DEAN. I was aghast. “MoTHERRR – this is for the dean! He’s like...the principal!” My mom, one of the shyest, most non-assertive women on earth, replied “Well, where is he? He should be here running things!”

Despite this possible offense, I was hired in 1975 by Dr. J.M. Chadha as an orthodontic assistant. I had zero dental experience beyond brushing my own teeth, so I was handed over to our radiologic tech, Shannon Duplantis, to learn all about x-rays: periapicals, panorex, lateral cephs, and the occasional hand-wrist image. One day during a lull, Shannon sat me down with a stack of Kodak Radiology magazines to study. The first one was a special issue on x-raying orofacial clefts. Every imaginable kind. I was vaguely familiar with

cleft palates but I’ll admit it was unnerving to see clefts that ran from the lip all the way to the eye and other extreme types. With time, though, I learned to accept these all as variations on the theme of facial development.

The Orthodontic department also served as headquarters for the Oral Facial Anomalies Group. We coordinated scheduling and record keeping for patients with an incredible array of facial development issues. The idea was to help parents and caregivers with a central location for dental and ortho treatment, speech therapy, plastic surgery, prosthetics, physical and occupational therapy, and more. I met a boy with no external ears, a young woman who’d been dropped on her face in infancy and never had treatment for the fractures, and a toddler who’d fallen onto the stickshift in his mom’s car, artificially cleaving his palate. This was my early introduction to special needs patients.

From Ortho I went to the Best Job Ever, as a medical artist in LSU’s Learning Resources. Raymond Calvert was my boss, mentor, and friend for thirteen years there. I left only because we needed a family member to help at Frank’s office. (Those who’ve heard our lecture on Embezzlement in the Dental Office

will know why.) A few years after leaving I learned about an opening in Continuing Education, and I had the joy of working with Dr. Vincent Liberto, learning all about event planning, web marketing, and brewing vats of coffee at 5 am for course attendees.

After 13 years in CE and a total of 31 years at LSUSD, it was time to retire. After a short break, I realized I could brush up on my rusty chairside skills and assist Frank at his UCPGNO clinic. This has been 90% joy, and 10% heartbreak. The heartbreak comes when parents hug you, saying they couldn’t find anyone to treat their severely disabled daughter. It comes when a mom talks about asking her dentist’s staff if she can get an appointment for her Down Syndrome son, and overhears the doctor say “I don’t treat those people.” The joy comes when patients smile at you, parents and caregivers smile, and everyone is glad to be there. When a non-verbal young woman runs into the clinic and hops in the chair, showing you her pink nail polish and squealing with delight at her new pink toothbrush.

You know that old, tiresome line we hear so often? “Nothing personal, but I hate dentists.” We never hear that at the clinic.

### WE WANT YOUR NEWS!!

**Anyone knowing of any dentist who has made a significant contribution, gained an elective or appointive office, written an article, delivered a paper, or rendered unusual public service, please let us know! [info@nodental.org](mailto:info@nodental.org)**