

# THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

'I looked around and I said to myself, I've got to do something to make a difference'

## The Canadian dentist who brings smiles to Jamaica

Toronto root canal specialist Gary Glassman sets his sights on Israel after demonstrating his philanthropic commitment at home and further afield

By Robert Sarnet March 30, 2017, 1:05 am



TORONTO — If many people in Jamaica are smiling easier today, it's thanks, in no small part, to Dr. Gary Glassman, a Jewish endodontist in Toronto whose philanthropic work has raised the level of oral health significantly in the Caribbean nation.

Each year, Jamaica attracts some 300,000 Canadian visitors, most seeking a sunbaked respite from their notoriously fierce winter. None of them has accomplished what Glassman has done over the past 20 years as part of his humanitarian mission.

Since learning about Jamaica's shortage of dentists and dire dental situation in 1998, Glassman has made dozens of trips there — at his own expense — donating his time and expertise. Forsaking fun in the sun, he's performed free, desperately-needed treatment, often of an emergency nature, on local residents in field clinics and health fairs. The majority often haven't seen a dentist in years, if ever. In addition, he's been at the forefront of educating and training Jamaica's future dentists to help make up for the acute lack of oral health practitioners.

If this was all Glassman did in terms of giving back, it would already be a vivid example of the age-old Jewish values of tikkun olam and tzedakah in action. Even more impressive, his work in Jamaica is only part of his benevolent efforts, the inspiration for which he attributes to his parents, both of whom are still alive.

"My desire to get involved in this kind of work is probably a function of the way I was brought up," says Glassman, 57, speaking at his successful root canal clinic in midtown Toronto.

"My parents always instilled in my two sisters and me the concept of helping others. Growing up in a Jewish household with a strong sense of family and giving back had a big influence on me. I guess you could say I'm a product of my Jewish upbringing with respect to my values."



Dr. Gary Glassman with a smiling patient. (Courtesy)

Glassman first tapped into his charitable side when he had an epiphany at age 39.

“The first time it really hit me was in Jamaica and it made a big impact on me,” says Glassman, who grew up in an upper class Toronto neighborhood thanks to his father’s successful sponge business. “I looked around and I said to myself, ‘I’ve got to do something to make some sort of a difference.’ I always wanted to help but what I saw in Jamaica sort of kick-started this part of my life.”

Since then, he’s become increasingly involved in helping others in Jamaica and beyond.

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“I like to make a difference and give back and I’ve tried to teach that to my children as well,” says Glassman, a divorced father of three.

In 2010, Glassman created the Goodwill Oral Health Project to formalize his volunteer work in Jamaica. That same year he became an unpaid adjunct professor at the University of Technology’s College of Oral Health Sciences in Kingston.

Since then, as part of his efforts to raise oral health standards in Jamaica by educating future dentists, he’s traveled there from Toronto several times a year to develop the program and curriculum, give lectures and help train dental students. Much to his satisfaction, he witnessed the first cohort of 22 graduates in 2015, all of whom are now practicing dentists in Jamaica.



The first cohort of 22 graduates from the University of Technology’s College of Oral Health Sciences in Kingston, where Dr. Gary Glassman volunteers, are now all practicing dentists in Jamaica. (Courtesy)

Glassman brought other Canadian dentists with him to help at the dental school and in health fairs and field clinics in remote areas of Jamaica. He's also provided supplies, equipment and techniques along with volunteer donations from others.

Glassman plans to expand the GOHP to other developing countries as part of his commitment to advance oral health and provide continuous quality care.

Closer to home, Glassman is involved in four other main causes — Autism Speaks; Leave Out Violence; Bridal Bash Foundation; and Save A Child's Heart — to which he gives of his time and money.

Autism Speaks is a major focus of his current efforts. He's developing an innovative program to sensitize and better train dentists to treat people with autism.



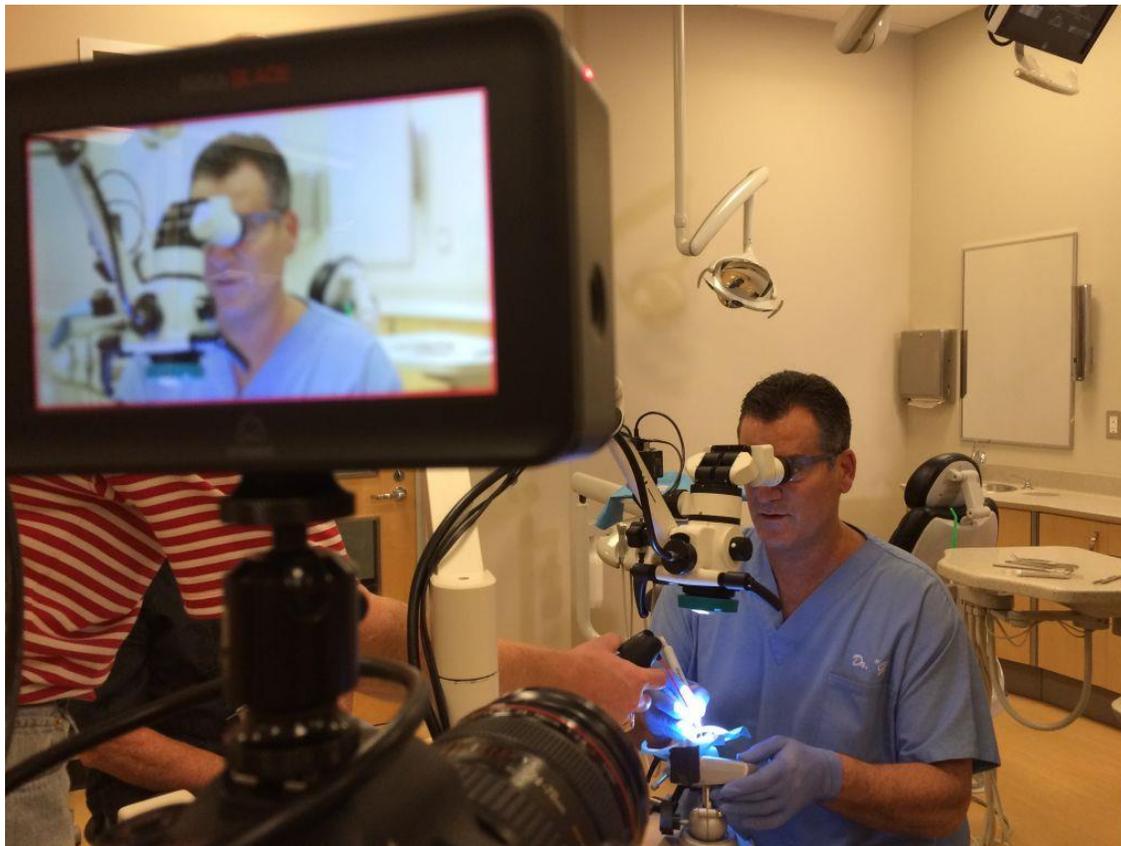
Dr. Gary Glassman. (Courtesy)

“The first step is raising awareness,” says Glassman, who comes across as highly personable. “I was surprised when I discovered that one in 68 kids in Canada are born with autism somewhere on the spectrum. Many suffer from not going to the dentist for different reasons. They're very sensitive to sights, sounds, smells. Some more, some less. So just entering a dental office can freak them out. As a result, many never want to go to the dentist and their oral health deteriorates badly.”

Glassman is devising a standardized plan for dentists to decrease the sensory stimulation in their offices to help autistic patients overcome their trepidation. It entails first having them visit the office to become familiar with it without undergoing treatment and simply hold a toothbrush and learn basic oral hygiene. He would have them come in at a less busy time of the day, lowering the lights and music to put them more at ease.

“It’s a process,” says Glassman. “For example, just getting them into the office, and having them sit in the reception area for five minutes and then leave, and then the next time getting them to simply sit in the chair and play with the mirrors and everything. And after the fifth or sixth visit, maybe they’ll feel comfortable enough to open their mouths so the dentist can have a look. It’s very incremental stuff.”

Glassman became involved in Autism Speaks due to someone he met through his volunteer work for another charity, Leave Out Violence (LOVE), for which he serves on the advisory board.



Dr. Gary Glassman volunteers with routine and emergency dental procedures in the field throughout Jamaica several times each year. (Courtesy)

“LOVE has to do with kids who were a witness to violence, or perpetrators of violence or affected by or victims of violence,” says Glassman. “It does innovative work to help these people.”

He discovered LOVE at Camp White Pine, two hours north of Toronto, which he attended in his youth. In recent years, at the end of every summer, a group of alumni (including Glassman) spend several days there, which sometimes coincides with a LOVE weekend program there.

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“They have different breakout sessions involving the kids which I found fascinating,” says Glassman, who loves the outdoors. “Their stories made an impact on me. How they grew up, where they grew up, how violence affected their lives, whether they were perpetrators or victims of it and how many become community leaders.”

Glassman became active in Save A Child’s Heart (SACH) through his girlfriend’s volunteer work for the Canadian chapter that raises funds for the Israel-based humanitarian organization. SACH offers free cardiac surgery to children from developing countries who it brings to Israel for live-saving medical care. He attends events and supports the organization financially.

At the same time, Glassman has played a central role in the Bridal Bash Foundation, which has raised \$6 million for charities from several private rock concerts it has staged since 2004. Named after the Bridal Path, the street where the concerts take place, and run entirely by volunteers, every cent generated goes to charities, Jewish and non-Jewish.



Dr. Gary Glassman is an advocate for new dental technology and education in Jamaica. (Courtesy)

Among his other charitable work, Glassman has taken part in a van program that the Ve'ahavta organization runs in Toronto to feed the homeless and he's contributed funds to restore one of the city's oldest synagogues. He says Israel will figure prominently in his future philanthropic efforts. He was last there in 1998 to give a dental course in Eilat.

"I don't currently have much involvement with Israel," says Glassman, whose two ex-brothers-in-law live there, "but it will be the main focus of my next endeavor. I want to spend time there offering services, such as my continuing education for dentists. I'm looking forward to it.

"As soon as I get the Jamaica initiative organized with successors, and I no longer have to go there so often, Israel will become my next main thing. I want to bring all the knowledge I have to help over there. Whether it's through clinics or just giving my time lecturing, I haven't yet thought a lot about it in terms of what I would do but I know I want to do it."



A big fan of travel and the outdoors, Dr. Gary Glassman often finds himself in new environments. (Courtesy)

It helps that Glassman is the restless type who loves to travel. He's rarely in Toronto for 10 days consecutively without traveling for his work, paid or philanthropic, except in the summer when he goes camping in the Canadian north. As he's in great demand all over the world for his expertise on oral health, he spends 40 to 50 days a year away lecturing at major dental conferences. In an average year, he goes to eight or nine countries.

This month, he's traveling to Australia for a four-city lecture tour in one week. In January, he left Toronto on a Thursday morning for Malaysia, arrived in Kuala Lumpur on Friday midnight, lectured Saturday and all day Sunday before traveling home on Monday. A few months earlier, he flew from Toronto to Hong Kong to give a lecture and later that day hopped on a plane to Argentina where he lectured at a weekend conference and then flew back to Toronto.

Unlike most dental practitioners, Glassman uses the services of a public relations firm, based in New York, that helps with his outreach through his website and blog and via journalists and social media.

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Last month, Glassman was quoted in US media about the growing numbers of oral and throat cancer caused by the HPV virus transmitted during oral sex. He strongly recommends people get the HPV vaccine before they're sexually active and take certain measures to prevent the spread of the virus. Saying it's a dangerous myth that oral sex is a safer alternative to intercourse, as seen in the recent spread of the HPV virus, Glassman cited a report suggesting HPV-positive throat cancer will overtake cervical cancer by 2020.

"The media is vital in raising awareness about the link between oral health and general health," says Glassman, who often appears on TV and radio about the subject.

"I want to make sure people understand good oral health is as important as physical fitness. It can affect your whole body. I keep at this information campaign because I want to help make the world a better place, even if I'm just a small cog in the wheel."

Dr. Gary Glassman flies to Jamaica several times a year to volunteer as an adjunct professor at the University of Technology's College of Oral Health Sciences in Kingston. (Courtesy)