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Dr. Usa Bunnag

A Woman With a Heart as Big as Her Smile

By Faye Rivkin

Dr. Usa Bunnag moved to the United States from Thailand at 14, leaving behind friends, family and everything familiar. Did she have any sense at the time just how far she'd go — physically and emotionally — and how many lives she'd affect along the way?

No task is too big, no idea too impossible for Dr. Bunnag. Nothing seems out of reach for this bubbly, petite bundle of energy, not a full practice with associates, not humanitarian missions to Thailand, not even a boutique selling Thai crafts. Whatever the mission, personal or professional, Dr. Bunnag is driven to give back.

She credits a number of individuals for helping her focus her energy and drive, and that list includes Drs. John Bigelow, general dentist, and Hazel Harper, general dentist and first female President of the National Dental Association.

Dr. Bigelow gave Dr. Bunnag her first job in dentistry, as an assistant in his office in Rockville, MD. Through Dr. Bigelow, she began to consider dentistry as a career, and it was he who suggested she could start with Montgomery County Community College (MCCC), for her prerequisites. She continued to work with Dr. Bigelow over 13 years that included two children and part-time study at MCCC and full-time at Howard University.

It was also Dr. Bigelow who introduced her to Dr. Harper, whom she credits with directing her to Howard for her dental degree. She'd only met Dr. Harper a handful of times, but "in a sense," says Dr. Bunnag, "she inspired me," as a woman, a minority dentist and an advocate for health legislation, someone who demonstrated it was possible to accomplish everything one wanted: a career in dentistry, a family and a life to be proud of.

Wife. Mother. Dentist. Humanitarian. Entrepreneur. Whatever the label, Dr. Bunnag has created a life to be proud of.

Dr. Usa Bunnag in Thailand

PHOTOS BY MARK MOYER

DR. BUNNAG — CARING DENTIST

With money borrowed on her mother-in-law's credit card, and a base of 50 patients, Dr. Bunnag opened her general dentistry practice (www.drbunnag.com) in 1996, in Potomac, MD, after just two years as an associate.

Her single operatory office has since grown to four, and today she treats children and adults with some of the most up-to-date materials and technologies, with the goals of education and comfort, to educate patients on the importance of dental health, and to make their visits as stress free as possible. Her fee-for-service

practice offers patients options that include a digital X-ray machine, a soft-tissue laser unit and a CEREC crown unit.

In 2001, Dr. Bunnag took advantage of a program that would forever change her and her practice. The Maryland Dent-Care Loan Assistance Repayment Program allows practicing dentists in Maryland to earn money towards their student loans, in exchange for treating children who might find it very difficult to find dental care elsewhere; children covered under the Medicaid dental program.

Not long into her three-year commitment, Dr. Bunnag realized just how fulfilling it was to treat the children, and didn't want their dental care to end once her loan commitment was complete, in her desire to keep preventative dental care accessible to all children. (For a time, hers was the only practice in Montgomery County servicing Medicaid children.) Dr. Bunnag looked to bring on an associate, one with the same level of dedication. Dr. Joyce Thomas, a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Dental School, joined the practice in 2005, after the two met casually to talk about women in dentistry. Dr. Thomas makes it a habit to ask female dentists with families for advice, as she has a family of her own. In addition to her words of wisdom — "Don't listen to people who tell you that things are not possible, keep asking for help when you need it, believe in yourself" — Dr. Bunnag offered her a part-time position, and suggested Dr. Thomas apply for the loan commitment program, which she did.

In their three years together, the two have developed a strong bond. "It's very different," says Dr. Thomas, "to be a mom and dentist. If she can do it all, I can." Dr. Thomas is a first-generation American and is excited to see a woman immigrant as a successful business owner.

PHOTOS BY MARK MOYER

With Dr. Thomas relocating to Florida, Dr. Bunnag brought in another associate. Dr. Grisel Agusti joined the practice as a part-time associate in October 2007, after meeting Dr. Bunnag at a GWAWD (Greater Washington Association of Women Dentists) event. "It's an office run by women, which I really like," says Dr. Agusti, "and it runs really well." Dr. Agusti believes that part of the reason for this level of efficiency, and her sentiment is repeated by members of Dr. Bunnag's staff, is their monthly staff meetings, a useful tool not often seen in dental practices.

Another useful tool seen in Dr. Bunnag's office is the ability to be a bit of an adventurer, which, according to Dr. Bunnag, comes with being a general dentist. "You have to do a variety of things," she says, "to be successful." For example, Medicaid allows for limited referrals to specialists, so as a result, she and her associates sometimes perform procedures not typically seen in a general dentistry office, including extractions and orthodontics.

Dr. Bunnag explaining the procedure to her patient

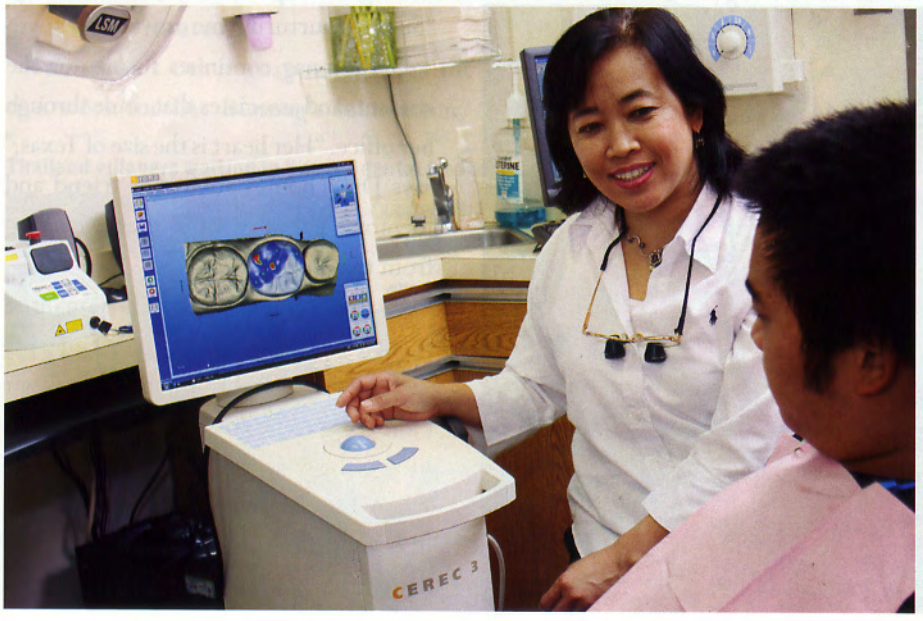

PHOTO BY MARK MOYER

Dr. Grisel Agusti and Dr. Usa Bunnag

This level of expertise, this thinking outside the box, is something Dr. Bunnag's patients have come to expect from all the women in her practice. "I've prepared them," she says, "to see Usa Bunnag, D.D.S., P.A., as an entity," rather than as an individual. "They trust me enough to trust those that work with me," which is critical when Dr. Bunnag is out of the office, either at her store or on one of her missions to Thailand.

Dr. Bunnag's staff

PHOTO BY MARK MOYER

She is considering further expansions to her office, including adding nondental services such as massage and aesthetics. Many of "my patients are baby boomers," she says, and "they want it all."

DENTIST AND HUMANITARIAN — HERE AND ABROAD

Some of Dr. Bunnag's confidence can be traced to the support she's received since her dentistry beginnings, and she considers herself blessed with individuals she considers mentors. As Dr. Bigelow's assistant, she met Dr. Susan Pearson, general dentist and a past president of the GWAWD, whom she describes as a "friend, confidant and supporter." The two have developed a bond that includes the ability to talk openly about their personal and professional lives. Dr. Pearson convinced her to join the GWAWD and the American Dental Association and has since nominated her for Fellows at the Pierre Fauchard Academy and the American College of Dentists (ACD) (Dr. Bunnag will be inducted into the ACD this fall). "As I nurture other dentists," says Dr. Bunnag, "Susan is nurturing me as well."

Dr. Bunnag continues to mentor the students and associates that come through her office. "Her heart is the size of Texas," says Dr. Thomas about her friend and mentor. "There's a lot of energy coming from that little peanut."

In the summer of 2003, Samantha Jacobs began working part time for Dr. Bunnag. A high-school student expecting to be answering phones and filing, she was awed and appreciative when Dr. Bunnag asked her to join her in an operatory on her first day. Samantha, who will be a sophomore

"Smiles on Wings" helping children in Thailand

at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, VA, this fall, considers Dr. Bunnag one of her strongest supporters, and still works for Dr. Bunnag part-time during school breaks. She credits Dr. Bunnag with her decision to major in community health education, showing her it is possible to give a community the tools it requires and the direction it needs, and watch it become self-sufficient. Dr. Bunnag is very proud of her protégé: "It is wonderful to nurture someone and watch that person grow. She will do something great in the future."

Samantha's other responsibilities include administrative work for Dr. Bunnag's foundation, Smiles on Wings (www.smilesonwings.org), which began in 2003 as a personal crusade to help Thailand's children. Dr. Bunnag's first mission that fall was to northwestern Thailand, and she returned in February 2004 to treat 150 children in three villages, with just three dentists and an assistant.

As she prepared for her fourth mission, the devastating tsunami eradicated parts of the western coast of Thailand in December 2004. According to Samantha, "Dr. Bunnag put her life on hold, gathered a team of doctors, nurses and other professionals," and headed to Thailand two weeks later to do what she could to help residents regain control of their lives, followed by a Maryland TV

Thailand villagers waiting in line for dental treatment

Dr. John Savukinas, a general dentist in Rockville, and Dr. Bunnag's son, Kris, helping with the "Smiles on Wings" mission to Thailand

Dr. Bunnag and her son, Raj

crew that broadcast the story of the first American medical team to provide care after the tsunami.

Twice a year Dr. Bunnag continues to take teams of dentists and assistants, along with dental, medical and whatever other supplies may be necessary, to villages throughout Thailand, including some of the most remote areas reached by boat or motorcycle (or elephant). Smiles on Wings has adopted two schools on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, and in 2009 the group plans to visit a tribal village that has never had a visit from a local dentist.

There are a limited number of dentists in Thailand, and they, according to Dr. Bunnag, earn the equivalent of about $800 USD per month. As a result, dental hygienists take on even greater responsibilities, performing extractions and completing sealants and fillings. Since the number of dental professionals is limited, Dr. Bunnag and her team play a critical role; "They know, they come, they wait," says Dr. Bunnag of the patients who may travel hours on foot to see a Smiles on Wings team.

Samantha was part of a mission in July 2006, when she was just 17. "Dr. Bunnag's philosophy," she says, "is to help these villages become self-sufficient, as she feels that establishing a relationship with a particular village with repeated visits is the key to improving their health status and quality of life."

These relationships give Dr. Bunnag a better understanding of how to best allocate her limited resources. "The gift of 400 blue, yellow, pink and green raincoats," says Samantha, "was invaluable to the Sobmuay village, whose children walk a mile to school in the rain and mud during the rainy season. It was also Dr. Bunnag's efforts that allowed the Mae Lid School to build a more sanitary bathroom for their students. Other villages have received food staples, mosquito nets and much-needed school supplies."

As a result of increased visibility, local medical and dental professionals have begun joining Dr. Bunnag on these missions of love. After returning from a mission, Dr. Susan Pearson and Nancy Tilkins, (orthodontist, and a member of GWAWD), felt so strongly about what they had experienced, that they joined Dr. Bunnag on the board of Smiles on Wings, Susan as treasurer and Nancy as secretary.

This past February, Dr. John Savukinas, general dentist in Rockville, was part of the Smiles on Wings team. Some combine work and touring, while others wish only to donate their time and skills. Dr. Bunnag develops the itinerary for each trip based on the abilities and desires of its team members.

Dr. Bunnag and her husband, Noi

"We were busy from the early morning," says Dr. Savukinas, "and we worked hard. This wasn't a vacation," believing they treated approximately 350 patients during their two-week trip. His team was stationed in northeastern Thailand, near its border with Laos, and focused on restorative work, debridements and extractions. Dr. Savukinas found the work "rewarding, centering, grounding, humbling and energizing." Grateful for the opportunity, he looks forward to a time when he can return.

Thai Crossing, Dr. Bunnag's specialty gift boutique

Dr. Savukinas' feelings are echoed by many who have participated in these missions. Linda Tunmatip, who has worked for Dr. Bunnag for over 12 years, first as a dental assistant, then as a hygienist, says that as a result of seeing that the people "in these small, remote, poor villages are happy with the little that they have, I love all I have even more." Since her return, Linda, who accompanied Smiles on Wings in July 2007, has continued to raise money and awareness, most recently with a fundraiser showcasing Thai music and culture.

Dr. Bunnag's family is as engaged in the cause as she. Her older son, Raj, has assisted on two missions; younger son Kris recently returned from a year teaching English in Thailand after participating in a mission; and her husband, Noi, who spends part of the year in Thailand, is their on-the-ground planner, builder and local go-to person, ensuring everything and everyone is where it needs to be, when it should be. One of his current undertakings is the building of a mobile dental unit, a dental office on wheels, so teams are less dependent on local resources. Smiles on Wings has a portable, self-contained Aseptico unit and an autoclave in Thailand, both purchased with donations, but until they can raise additional funds, the group works with local organizations for their larger equipment needs. And instead of an extra T-shirt or two, mission participants bring composites, gowns, sealants and gloves in their luggage. In July 2006, the suitcases also contained over 500 Beanie Babies, collected for the children by Samantha to be distributed to the children they'd meet.

Dr. Bunnag's efforts have been recognized by the governor of Maryland, the Ministry of Public Health in Thailand and in her local community. Recently, she was presented with a community service award from the Asian Pacific American Chamber of Commerce for Montgomery County, MD, for her work with patients who might not receive

Thai artisans creating a beautiful scarf

Dr. Bunnag choosing from the finished pieces created by the Thai artisans

Dr. Bunnag holding one of her own paintings

treatment otherwise. In 2007, she received the Sapphire Award from the Women Business Owners of Montgomery County, also in recognition of her work in Thailand and in her own community.

For Dr. Bunnag, the recognition isn't something she looks for. For her, the press is simply more visibility into the needs of the children.

DENTIST AND ENTREPRENEUR

"I don't know how to sit still," she jokes, and so in 2007, Dr. Bunnag opened Thai Crossing, a specialty gift boutique now housed in the Woodmont Triangle neighborhood of Bethesda. According to the Thai Crossing website (www.thaicrossing.com), she realized that another way "to help the people of Thailand was to provide an outlet for the villagers to become self-reliant. Thai Crossing sells a variety of beautiful jewelry, silk, cotton, woodcarvings, ceramics, furniture and other handmade home décor items" crafted by Thai artisans.

There is no welfare system in Thailand, and according to Dr. Bunnag, "everyone works to earn money for food." As there isn't much of a market for these goods in Thailand, Dr. Bunnag opened the boutique, and each time she visits Thailand, she purchases and brings back these beautiful handiworks to sell.

Her entrepreneurial spirit and strong work ethic may have been inherited from her mother, who owned a restaurant and gift shop in Thailand. Dr. Bunnag works in the store several days a week. "Being in the store is very therapeutic for me." When she isn't in the store, the colorful, stylish boutique is run by people just as caring as she, including Samantha, Raj and her sister, Nualpan (older sister Kiki is the receptionist in her dental practice) and Piyawan (Penny) Kovach, who Dr. Bunnag describes as "my friend, my patient, my in-house-artist."

A number of Penny's paintings hang on the walls of Thai Crossing. You won't find any of Dr. Bunnag's, yet. As a self-taught watercolor artist, her pieces hang in her office and her home. She also enjoys sewing, and is currently designing her first commissioned work, a mother-of-the-bride dress.

Everything Dr. Bunnag does is done with care, with love and with thought. With her mind always going, she is always looking out for others and continues to inspire those around her. Not only does she schedule her work time, she schedules her downtime as well, the little that she has — 5:30 a.m. walks with her dog, her daily yoga and meditation — all are scheduled, so there is time for all. ■