

The profession of dental hygienist, as experienced by...

EVELYNE LEFEBVRE

By Catherine Zemelka

“When people in the communities thank us, it’s very touching. There are no words to describe the emotions that overcome us when they do. Moreover, this happens while I am carrying out my occupation, while I am doing what I love. Personally, I feel an explosion of pure happiness, which can only be experienced, not described.”



Evelyne Lefebvre, DH

Evelyne Lefebvre is an adventurous young woman, in the truest sense of the word. For eight years now, the 30-year-old has been living and working among the Cree of Quebec, in James Bay. Her first stop was in Chisasibi, a 15-hour drive from Montreal and the farthest community accessible by road, home to 5,000 residents, including herself for six years. For the past two, she has been actively involved in the lives of 800 native people in Oujé-Bougoumou, eight hours to the north of the metropolis. Her main function is in her role as Regional Dental Hygienists Team Leader for the Cree Board of Health and Social Services of James Bay. She also oversees community health programs.

Yet there had been no indication that this bubbly dental hygienist, who struck out on her own for a one-month temporary replacement job, would find herself staying so far from her family and her native Montreal. That she would brave endless winters, spend most of her free time out in the wilderness, hunting, fishing or simply contemplating the beauty of the Northern Lights... Because, although Evelyne has always loved to travel – she has already visited some twenty-odd countries – she always, eventually, found her way home. Today, she has a new home, in James Bay. She only leaves the region to take a vacation, to go see her friends and family, or...to take part in humanitarian projects in an entirely different setting.

Read on to discover a young professional whose passion for her career choice has led her not only to the Great North of Quebec, but also as far off as Guatemala. It is true: the profession of dental hygienist can lead to travel and adventures that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

1 | You graduated in 2005. What was your motivation for becoming a dental hygienist?

In my family, oral hygiene has always played an important role, undoubtedly because my mother had dental problems as a child. She did not want the same thing to happen to her own children. So we brushed our teeth three times a day and went to see the dentist regularly. When I was young, I received orthodontic treatment. At first, I even wanted to work as a hygienist for an orthodontist. But, in the end, life had other plans for me.

2 | Could you have imagined that your profession would take you on an adventure to Chisasibi, among the Cree of Quebec?

Absolutely not! I come from Montreal. I always considered myself to be a very urban, fashionable kind of girl... But one class at school changed all that. If I remember correctly, it was called, "Preparing for the workplace." A number of professionals had come to offer us their services, and others, to talk about their real-life experiences. But it was the words of a dental hygienist who came to talk about her work with the Cree of James Bay that really stood out for me. Starting at the age of 17, I visited around 20 countries and so, being the adventurer that I am, I thought that that would be a really interesting experience to have. I gave her my name and was offered a one-month replacement job. However, I never thought that I would end up living there permanently. Along the way, I was offered a six-month position replacing a hygienist on paternity leave. I agreed. I could already tell that I enjoyed that environment. I wanted to learn more, to better understand Cree culture. Later on, that position was made permanent. Eight years on, I'm still there. It's also where I met my boyfriend. Both of us still love living and working in James Bay.

What I find the funniest is the fact that, for the past five years, I have been the person making the rounds of the general and vocational colleges, to introduce their students to James Bay. Dental hygienists have many options other than working at an urban dental clinic. The prospects are plentiful in our profession!

3 | What are the differences in the operations of dental clinics in a Cree territory, compared with practices elsewhere?

Fundamentally speaking, they operate in exactly the same way. We have the same modern equipment as anywhere else. The big difference lies in the fact that 50% of our work pertains to community health, practised outside the dental clinic. This community portion is essential. We also go to schools and day-care centres to apply fluoride varnish and sealant. And we work with pregnant women and young children at clinics, under Awash*.

We sometimes give presentations on the local radio station. And because we live in small communities, the people with whom we work on community health are the same people who come to see us at the dental clinic. This gives us a chance to create a special relationship, based on trust.

* A maternal/child health program.

4 | You do not work in a foreign country. Oujé-Bougoumou is an eight-hour drive from Montreal. And yet, people speak an indigenous language, and the lifestyle is completely different from everything we know. Does it feel to you like being in another country? Tell us about your life there...

When I first landed in James Bay, the difference was striking. There was snow everywhere. The temperature got down to -50°C and, despite the dry climate, it was cold! The vegetation there is different, too. In addition, most of the population have teepees in their yards. The teepees are used to smoke wild game and to cook and sleep. They are also used for traditional ceremonies and rites of passage. In fact, it was at a first steps ceremony* that I tasted bannock for the first time. Bannock is a traditional bread, made with water, flour and oil. You insert a stick into the dough and cook it at the edges of the fire. It's delicious! It has a crunchy crust with a soft inside. I also had the opportunity to try wild game: beaver, Canada goose, bear and more. They're also very good. They are served seasoned with salt or pepper, or even with nothing at all. You can also dip them in fat.

No, it no longer feels like a foreign land to me. When people ask me where I'm from, I tell them that I am originally from Montreal, but James Bay is my home. At Oujé-Bougoumou, I feel like I belong.

* The Walking Out Ceremony allows families to introduce a new child to the community, by celebrating his/her first steps.

5 | What is the most difficult aspect of your work environment?

In the beginning, I had to adapt. The Cree do not have the same mentality as we do. They do not talk much with strangers. You have to give them time to get used to you, and you need to take the time to get used to them. You might ask a question, express your needs, but not get an answer right away. That silence must be respected. You have to be resourceful there. Also, everything happens more slowly... In the cities, we are used to things moving very quickly. In James Bay, you have to learn to relax and take the time to enjoy life. People there are not full of stress. They live on what is called "Indian time." In the end, this has a positive effect on health.



Educational meeting with women from the Caliaj community

6 Your work history is very unusual. With everything you know now, are there any concepts that you would like to see added to dental hygiene training?

A class should be added on how to teach, how to share your knowledge with your patients. Part of a dental hygienist's work is prevention. And when we say "prevention," we actually mean "teaching." Our classes at school teach us theoretical and practical concepts, but not how to convey a message. Some people are more auditory, others more visual or more tactile... And some patients are resistant. Adding "motivational interviewing" to our classroom education would help us do our jobs even better. This is a new approach, in which the dental hygienist can help lead a patient to make his/her own decisions. You ask questions and come up with solutions, together. You understand the person within his/her context. A single mother of three, working two jobs, does not have the time to oversee her children's tooth-brushing habits. You need to educate based on the person's life, not just on what you learned in school.

7 Dental hygiene really gets you going. Then again, if you weren't as passionate about it, you would not have been a part of a very special project carried out in Guatemala...

In 2007, I was approached to participate in a prevention project on oral health, called "Sowing Smiles," working with the Maya in Guatemala. The idea came from Dr Claude Leduc, who was already a regular on humanitarian missions. That project, conducted in collaboration with Dentists Without Borders, was headed up by the Association des Chirurgiens Dentistes du Québec (Association of Dental Surgeons of Quebec). And it was financed by the Canadian International Development Agency, which had earmarked funding for a worldwide prevention program.

The project eventually took shape in 2009. Sowing Smiles targeted 4,000 Guatemalans scattered across 18 Mayan communities in the Tecpan Region. It included a preventative component and a curative one. Since I already had a year-and-a-half working with native people under my belt, I was put in charge of prevention. We did our work out in the field...in Spanish. I had to learn the language so that I could teach the four local nurses involved in the project. One of the things I did to learn it quickly was live with a Guatemalan family for a month.

8 What did your field work entail?

In the morning, we went to the elementary school to make presentations, give out information about brushing, and distribute mouthwash and fluoride varnish. In the afternoon, we taught the basics of oral hygiene to women, especially mothers, so they could monitor their families' practices in the home. This training also took place at the school. The women were invited to come see us there. For their part, the men were out in the fields. Whenever they leave their work, they lose income. We had to explain to the native people that a toothache, if left untreated, would not go away on its own and that, the longer they waited to have their tooth repaired, the more days of work they would lose. Our role, in fact, was to raise awareness on good oral hygiene, which is directly linked to overall health.

In Guatemala, people are either very rich or very poor. The communities that we visited have neither electricity nor running water. In addition, most of the children only attend three years of school, continuing just long enough to learn to read, write and count. This enables them to sell their produce at market.

Furthermore, there were also days when Guatemalan dentists would travel to treat people in the communities. And twice a year (for about a week each time), we were visited by dentists, dental hygienists and dental assistants from Dentists Without Borders. The workstations at the ambulatory dental clinics were separated by function: extractions, fillings, cleanings, and so on.



March 2012: data collection at a primary school in the Paraxquin community, to assess changes between the beginning and end of the Sowing Smiles project

It was a wonderful project! At its end, in 2012, toothbrushes and toothpaste had become a part of every required school supply list. And the people had fewer cavities and less plaque. They were more aware of the importance of tooth-brushing.

Although the project is over, Université Laval continues to send its students to Guatemala for on-the-job training.

9 | I am guessing that this project is one of your greatest professional achievements. Do you have any others in the works?

That type of project requires a great deal of time and energy. I had to set time aside for it for four years, including two months a year on-site in the field. I worked through all of my holiday time. So now, I'm taking at least a two-year break. Also, I'm not single anymore, so I need to consider the person with whom I share my life, as well. But I would like to continue being involved. There are a number of different possibilities. A friend of mine wants to start a prevention program in Honduras, and another, a mission to India... I am thinking about it, but I don't know yet what life has in store for me.

I should also add that the project in Guatemala helped me to grow enormously, both personally and professionally.

I had to deal with a wide variety of situations, both positive and negative. I saw Sowing Smiles through to the end. Without that experience, I would not be the woman I am today. In short, I am very proud of what we accomplished as a team, and of what I brought to the project and to the Mayas. When people in the communities thank us, it's very touching. There are no words to describe the emotions that overcome us when they do. Moreover, this happens while I am carrying out my occupation, while I am doing what I love. Personally, I feel an explosion of pure happiness, which can only be experienced, not described.

10 | The next dental hygienists' convention will take place this October in Quebec City. What does that special time for exchanging with colleagues mean to you?

It is, indeed, a special time. There are more than 5,600 dental hygienists working throughout the province, and we rarely have the chance to see one another. The convention fosters exchanges between people who share the same passion. Additionally, the conference topics are always relevant to us. It's our own, personal moment of grace! ■

**EVELYNE LEFEBVRE
AFTER HOURS**

1. Winter lasts six months in Oujé-Bougoumou. How do you deal with that harsh climate?

I have never in my life spent as much time outdoors as I have since moving to James Bay. After work, I walk my dog. I go for quad and snowmobile rides in the woods behind my house. I also go snowshoeing, hunting, camping, ice fishing in our cabin and fishing from boats. I garden, too, and make up new cooking recipes... And I even do some construction work with my boyfriend. I have also signed up for a class on wild mushrooms.

2. What dish is best for warming you up when it's -30°C outside?

One of my first choices would be a tourtière meat pie from Lac-Saint-Jean. I make it using my boyfriend's grandmother's recipe.

3. If you were a politician...

I'm not really interested in politics. But if I were to go into that domain, I would be someone with a field focus. I would go to see the people; I would want to see what life was actually like for their families.

4. The aurora borealis is a magnificent sight! Where you live, you often have the opportunity to gaze at the Northern Lights. What effect does this have on you?

Each time I see the Northern Lights, I'm like a little kid again. When I see them, I stop everything I'm doing! I still cry out in amazement, each time. The aurora can last anywhere from five minutes to six hours. The light dances across the sky, changing shapes, colours and intensity. It's magical!

5. What types of shows do you get on the small screen in Oujé-Bougoumou?

I don't have a television at home, because I don't have the time to watch it. But those who do have one have the same channels as anywhere else in the province. We get cable and satellite TV. Plus, fibre optics is coming soon.

6. Could you teach us a few words in Cree?

- Watchiya: Hello
- Meegwetch: Thank you
- Paapihkwei: Keep smiling
- Djibbit: Tooth
- Mwei: No
- Agoodah: All right
- Shash: It's finished