

Winifred J. Booker, D.D.S.

Children's Oral Health Manifesto

By Peg Silloway

It's bright orange with a lime green handle. Pick it up and it rattles with the promise of treasures within. Bright labels adorn all the surfaces of the kid-friendly plastic lunch box. As you open the latch, a silvery smile sticker reflects your own grin.



You've just met *Lessons in a Lunch Box: Healthy Teeth Essentials and Facts About Snacks*, the brainchild of Dr. Winifred J. Booker. And like the more than 4,000 elementary school children in Maryland who have already received one, you cannot resist holding this cheerful box and exploring the goodies within. Like any kid, the first things you do is pick up the giant carrot and twist off the green top, noting that it is really a little rinse cup. Open the carrot on its lengthwise hinge, and inside you see a child-sized toothbrush and flavored floss snug in their assigned spaces, along with a tube of children's natural fluoride toothpaste — fruit flavored, of course. Also in the box, and fascinating to children, is a sand timer with brightly colored crystals to remind you how long to brush. On the inside of the top is an illustrated guide to brushing and flossing in



English and Spanish. The bottom of the box has the USDA's My Pyramid, to help children learn about nutrition.

FIGHTING CHILDREN'S DENTAL DISEASE

This treasure chest you've just been exploring is the result of Dr. Booker's frustration with the state of children's oral health and her determination that the epidemic of oral disease in 5- to 17-year-olds can and must be reduced. It is the culmination of work that began when she received her Doctor of Dental Surgery from Meharry Medical College in Nashville, TN. She recalls that in 1987, the message was that the incidence of dental caries was down, but her experience working in an impoverished community in Baltimore City was quite the contrary. She was seeing a lot of children with massive disease. She invested in nice toothbrushes and spent time on education and teaching the proper way to brush. She even continued the tradition of having healthy Halloween parties that she was taught in dental school. But she still didn't seem to be making very much headway.





Brushtime Bunny

After four years as a clinic dentist for the Baltimore City Health Department, she went back to school to specialize in pediatric dentistry. Accepted into a program at the Children's National Medical Center in Washington, DC, she continued to practice on weekends and long holidays while earning her certificate in pediatric dentistry.

With her own practice established, Dr. Booker continued to see children with oral disease. She started keeping a diary and asking kids, "How come you don't brush your teeth? How come I gave you this good toothbrush and toothpaste and dental floss, and you don't use them?" She found the children were coming back with responses like, "I didn't know what to do," "I couldn't find my toothbrush" and "the toothpaste was hot." Parents often will buy the family size toothpaste, which is adult toothpaste, and it's too spicy or too minty — it burns children's mouths. Of course they don't want to use it! That diary was the genesis of the Brushtime Bunny, her first oral health education product.

SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT CHILDREN'S ORAL HEALTH

Brushtime Bunny is an aid for teaching children oral hygiene and how to brush. The friendly looking bunny holds a large carrot and also plays a motivational song. With her own savings and help from family, she was able to create and manufacture her patented bunny. But being a small practice and burdened with student loans, Dr. Booker wasn't in a position to do a large marketing effort to give the

Brushtime Bunny wide exposure. Parents would buy the product and still she wasn't reaching a lot of people, and still didn't feel she was making headway against the epidemic. "What can one dentist do with the amount of oral disease we're seeing in children in this country?" she asked herself.

What she needed was a broader reach, and so Dr. Booker established the nonprofit Maryland Children's Oral Health Institute (MCOHI), like that of her late mentor, Dr. June Owen's Children's Oral Health Institute of Tennessee. Dr. Booker is the CEO and Director of Development for the MCOHI. The 501(c)3 organization was created to combat dental neglect and oral abuse among children. The goal is to improve the attitudes and behavior of children and families on a variety of oral health issues through early health promotion and disease prevention education. The organization creates community partnerships with businesses, government, educational institutions, dentists and physicians, civic organizations and individuals to increase public awareness of dental neglect and to improve the oral health care of children.

The statistics are disturbing: tooth decay remains the single most common chronic disease among children ages 5 to 17. The social and educational impact of oral disease in children is substantial, with more than 50 million school hours lost each year to dental-related illnesses.

Dr. Booker explaining Lessons in a Lunch Box to a group of excited elementary students.



Dr. Booker is always looking for ways to fight this epidemic at its source — prevention. One day she was shopping for a birthday present and saw a lunch box with Spiderman on it. That was her “Eureka!” moment. She knew she could turn this into her oral health prevention manifesto for kids. The lunch box was a perfect vehicle for her message. “When should you brush your teeth? After you eat. What’s inside your lunch box? Your meal!” *Lessons in a Lunch Box* was born.

IT’S ALL IN — AND ON — THE BOX

The box has messages everywhere because it has so many surfaces. Besides the reflective smile and the inside-the-box messages, there is something to read no matter how you pick up your orange case. On one side is the name of the program along with the logos of the dental organizations who have signed on as supporters: the Society of American Indian Dentists, the American Association of Women Dentists, the National Dental Association, the Hispanic Dental Association and the Academy of General Dentistry. Turn the box over, and displayed around a smiling tooth and its grocery basket full of fruits and vegetables are the organizations that have donated funds or in kind support to the program: Colgate, Henry Schein, Boxed Out Graphx, Brushtime Products, the American Dental Hygiene Association Institute For Oral Health, Doral, GUM, We Teach and Tutor, the Dental Trade Alliance Foundation, the city of Baltimore and The Maryland Children’s Oral Health Institute. Even the end panels have a part to play. One has a sticker for the child’s name, and the other lists 58 dental schools and allied education programs in the U.S., along with the URL for the American Dental Education Association.

Never one to be satisfied with a single message, Dr. Booker saw one more space for a message and not a message about oral health. This one is about a career choice. As she says, “We are having a problem with children not being interested in the profession of dental medicine. So, I had one more surface left and added the half-moon reflective sticker that says, ‘See yourself becoming a dentist,’ and around the curve of the smile it says, ‘Dental Hygienist — Dental Laboratory Technician — Dental Assistant — Dental Office Receptionist.’

They love it!”

Dr. Booker knew that she couldn’t just hand out a few thousand bright lunch boxes and hope that things would change. Her mission needed organization and buy-in from government, school leaders and volunteers who would distribute the boxes and present the oral health care education lessons. And for that she needed strength in the MCOHI leadership. She reached out to people she knew, including Mrs. Sherry Holland Senter. When Dr. Booker’s office was in the inner city of Baltimore, Holland Senter taught second grade in the school across the street. Holland Senter came to Dr. Booker because she was frustrated about the children she was seeing in her classroom that had obvious decay in their mouths that kept them from learning. Dr. Booker started going into the classroom and teaching kids about oral health, often taking the Brushtime Bunny

Dr. Leslie Grant speaking to dentists and members of Congress at the National Dental Association Day on the Hill in Washington, DC.



and other teaching aids. When she needed an educational resources consultant for the MCOHI, Dr. Booker knew that Holland Senter was the perfect choice.

When she first came up with the idea for *Lessons in a Lunch Box*, the past president of the National Dental Association (NDA), Dr. Leslie Grant, immediately saw the potential of the wonderfully imaginative lunch box. Dr. Booker had cut and pasted a mockup lunch box. She shared it with Dr. Grant and asked her opinion of the concept. Dr. Grant's reaction was, "Wow, I think it's a great idea!" From there, the idea took off and Dr. Grant agreed to take the position of Director of Advocacy and Outreach for the MCOHI. This was not surprising to many with the theme of her NDA presidency, "Committed to Health Equity Through Unity and Collaboration." Dr. Grant has been a tireless advocate, traveling to meetings with Dr. Booker and helping to present the program at the elementary schools along with other volunteers and board members.

For Director of Operations, Dr. Booker appealed to Dr. Michele Dozier, a young dentist with a dedication and passion for embracing benevolent projects. Her invaluable role with the MCOHI is one of many volunteer commitments. Dr. Dozier largely coordinated the lunch-box packaging operation with the dental students and volunteer dentists and helped to guarantee the delivery of the lunch boxes to the elementary schools. Dr. Dozier and Dr. Booker work together in her private practice, Valley Dental Pediatrics.

Ms. Shannon M. Paige, a rising senior at Emory University has worked with Dr. Booker and The Maryland Children's Oral Health Institute since high school. Although the youngest member of the board, she is a tremendous asset, often consulted for her visionary perspective on the programs and projects. Shannon believes the *Lessons in a Lunch Box* program will help to favorably influence the thinking of parents and principals about oral health education.

With MCOHI well-organized, Dr. Booker began pulling together the resources needed to disseminate the lunch boxes and her educational message. They created a five-day lesson plan for teachers that could be incorporated with daily classroom instruction. The lesson plan includes a mathematics, science, reading and health

section, plus a final section about the profession of dental medicine as a career. The material was compiled from the Internet and fills the plan book with dozens of resources.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS ON A 'TOUR OF DUTY'

Dr. Booker knew that she would need school principals to be on board with the program in order for it to be most effective. In the days after the death of 12-year-old Deamonte Driver from an abscessed tooth, Dr. Booker, Dr. Grant and Dr. Kenny Hooper, President of the Maryland Dental Society, requested to meet with the Maryland Department of Health & Mental Hygiene Secretary,



Dr. Dozier handing out the *Lessons in the Lunch Box* to students.



Dr. Booker and a group of children excited about receiving their *Lessons in a Lunch Box*.

John M. Colmers to try and make sense of the tragedy. Dr. Booker had the lunch box in her brief case and toward the end of the hour-long discussion, she asked the Secretary's opinion. He liked the idea and suggested the MCOHI meet with Baltimore city officials including the School District CEO Dr. Charlene Boston Cooper, the Health Commissioner, Dr. Joshua Sharfstein and Mayor Sheila Dixon's office. At the end of May 2007, the city agreed, and provided in-kind assistance to help advance the *Lessons in a Lunch Box* program.

The next step was to be sure that the principals and teachers of the Title I schools that the program targeted would also buy in and be supportive. In July 2007, the MCOHI organized a breakfast meeting — "A Tour of Duty" — at Kernan Hospital. Of the 14 elementary school principals invited, nine were able to attend. The morning began with Dr. Grant explaining that the event was organized to bring health professionals and educators together to discuss the efforts needed to help relieve and prevent the pain and suffering of children with dental disease.

The presentation included an outline of the commitments needed from MCOHI, dental professionals, physicians, elementary school educators and parents to make the *Lessons in Lunch Box* program a long-term success. Dr. Booker recalls, "We showed them how the disease progresses from a white spot on the teeth to a child with a

swollen face." During the presentation, one of the principals raised her hand and said, "I've been teaching for 30 years and I saw those brown spots; I didn't know what they were."

The participants actually saw a child in the operating room, on a gurney with a tube threaded down his nose and machine breathing for him because he had such advanced dental disease that he had to have general anesthesia to address the needed comprehensive dental rehabilitation. That kind of up-close view gave the principals a new perspective on the dangers and consequences of the epidemic. They enthusiastically signed on to the program for their schools.

A SEA OF ORANGE

Just a few months later, on January 18, 2008, the program had its official launch at Franklin Square Elementary School, when 183 students received their own shiny, new lunch boxes. Dr. Booker remembers how the children enjoyed exploring the entire box, especially the carrot case and the sand timer. When school was dismissed, a sea of bright orange lunch boxes spilled out of the school as children ran to show parents and grandparents their new treasures.

This scene was repeated at other elementary schools throughout the spring, with more than 4,000 lunch boxes distributed by the end of April. Dozens of teachers have used the lesson plans that

the MCOHI provides. United States Senator Benjamin Cardin; Maryland Congressman Elijah Cummings; National Dental Association President Dr. Nathan Fletcher; the Deans of both Howard University College of Dentistry and the Baltimore College of Dental Surgery, Drs. Leo Rouse and Christian Stohler; as well as other city and state government officials have enthusiastically demonstrated their support by attending or sending representatives to many of the events.

For the next school year, the MCOHI will still concentrate on Title I elementary schools, but will work to reach many more youth. “This disease does not discriminate, we want to reach as many children as we can,” says Dr. Booker. Based on plaque scores that were done before lunch boxes were given and then followed up two months later, the greatest improvement in dental health is seen in kindergarten to third grade students. Since November is dental hygiene month, the MCOHI plans to have the lunch boxes distributed by the end of September or early October 2008.

FUTURE DENTISTS PITCH IN

Reaching children was one of the goals of the program, but not the only one. Just as important to Dr. Booker and the MCOHI is engaging dental students and general dentists to educate them about pediatric dentistry. As she says, “I don’t think that we’re ever going to get in front of the challenge of accessing care if we don’t do a better job of educating dental students about kids who are suffering.” Dental students are often unaware of the immense pain, suffering and lack of awareness about proper oral health care that is pervasive in deprived rural and inner-city communities. It was not until the tragic death of Deamonte Driver that students began to understand more about the access to dental care challenges facing the U.S.

Dr. Booker has involved dental students from the University of Maryland-Baltimore College of Dental Surgery and the Howard University College of Dentistry in the work of the MCOHI. They helped distribute the boxes at schools and helped young children learn about their new lunch boxes. The dental students also volunteered their time and energy to assemble thousands of the lunch boxes.



Two schoolchildren examine the contents of their lunch box.

Dr. Booker sees this as a fun way to get dental school students to understand that kids are really kind of fun to work with and not as challenging as they might believe. “A lot of dentists don’t work with kids because they think they are difficult to treat. But if you start teaching kids about prevention and oral health, they look forward to coming into the office and have their teeth cleaned.” Dr. Booker explains, “That’s part of the reason the MCOHI was established, to do some grassroots outreach to general dentists.”

As important as dental school students are to the program, the deans of those schools are equally important. Earlier this year, Dr. Booker and Dr. Grant presented the *Lessons in a Lunch Box* program to the American Dental Education Association’s Council of Dental School deans at their meeting in Dallas. Along with their own orange lunch box, the deans received a presentation portfolio explaining how dental schools can get involved. More than half of the dental schools in the U.S. have signed up for the program, and each will receive 250 free lunch boxes and 25 lesson plans along with an instructional package to teach them how to get the boxes out in the community. As Dr. Booker says, “Dental school deans and academicians could impact the number of graduating doctors willing to provide care in underserved communities by

Dental students from the University of Maryland-Baltimore College of Dental Surgery and the Howard University College of Dentistry join the board of MCOHI to help distribute the more than 4,000 lunch boxes.



including programs like *Lessons in a Lunch Box* as part of the curriculum. A movement by the stewards of dental education to require grassroots, community outreach prerequisites may exponentially accelerate the progress in the struggle to improve access to care.”

THE RIGHT TOUCH WITH YOUNG DENTAL PATIENTS

Talking to Dr. Booker, you hear the entrepreneur and the philanthropist and the creative thinker. But this woman is also a pediatric dentist who finds children to be delightful patients. She knows that not all dentists are comfortable treating children and does all she can to spread the word on what they are missing. She created a presentation that she does through the MCOHI called *Communicating With Kids in a Dental Environment: Child Friendly Dialog and Awesome Distractions*. In her office, you see this philosophy at work. In addition to operatories, an open dental hygiene area includes bright colors, four child-sized dental chairs and a bank of sinks at little-kid and not-so-little kid heights where the young patients can practice brushing.

Part of the success in working with young dental patients is distracting them by giving them something else to concentrate on. One delicious distraction is the flavored gloves that Valley Dental Pediatrics uses — grape, vanilla orange, strawberry, blueberry and green apple. Dr. Booker says kids are so distracted by those gloves that you can give them an injection and they never even know it happened. Language, too, is important. “I would never say to a child that I’m going to give you a needle. I use sleepy cream and sleepy drops,” she says. “The hand piece is my toothbrush motorcycle. I had one child who complained about the smell coming from my motorcycle, not realizing that it was the decay in her tooth!” All of the operatories have a ceiling light panel and is decorated with a blooming tree branch with beautiful pink flowers or hot air balloons or large colorful kites. One child exclaimed, “Dr. Booker, you’ve got the sky in here!” When Dr. Booker told another little boy she had seen a baby bird on that tree, but thought he had gone to Florida when it got cold in the winter, that boy assured her he had seen that bird five times while he was in the chair. Sometimes she’ll hum a tune or sing a children’s song or she’ll tell a story. Children will close their eyes, “... and before you know it, I’ve done a filling, I’ve done a crown, I’ve completed the pulpotomies and stainless-steel crowns.” Dr. Booker gives a Popsicle to every child who leaves her office anesthetized because it helps “that funny feeling” wear off and it’s a distraction to help prevent chewing of the lips and tongue.



Dr. Booker visits Senator Barack Obama’s office to introduce *Lessons in a Lunch Box*.

This ability to talk to children without talking down is partly instinctive and partly learned from her mother who was an elementary school teacher. Dr. Booker says, “My mother was that way; she was quick on her feet to engage kids. She was a corrective reading and writing teacher, and she did things that were fun and different.” She was also a great storyteller; in the summer they would turn off the lights and listen to her poems and stories and get lost in imagination.

GETTING BACK TO BASICS

The organizational skills that have helped MCOHI to grow can also be traced to Dr. Booker’s parents, who were both educators. Being able to envision the organization, Dr. Booker also knew that she needed strength around her and so she recruited the team of Dr. Grant, Dr. Dozier and Mrs. Holland Senter. She knows that she can depend on them to help her and the MCOHI make a difference. “It’s important for us to get back to what has been the core of our profession and that’s prevention. The profession of dental medicine is in trouble; there are far too many children walking around with untreated dental disease. When Deamonte Driver died, there were people panicking and trying to get appointments immediately. They would call and we’d say we don’t have any appointments and they would come in anyway. This country buried two too many children because of dental disease — Deamonte Driver and Alexander Callendar of Mississippi died within weeks of each other. No child should ever die for lack of dental care and oral health education. We’ve got to do things as the stewards of dental health to make a difference to educate young children about the importance of proper dental health and good eating habits.”

With Dr. Booker and the MCOHI on their side, children in Maryland and throughout the country can look forward to a brighter dental future. As well as a really cool lunch box. ■