**A Personal Mission: Bridging the Oral Health Care Gap**

By: Monique Trice

Growing up in a single-parent household, my siblings and I experienced gaps in dental care. Fortunately, we never suffered from an untreated cavity from poor oral health care, but many low-income, underserved children and adults are not so lucky.

 Working in the field of dentistry during high school and as an undergraduate, I encountered numerous patients with untreated dental caries. Most of them were preventable, but lack of insurance coverage for dental care and/or lack of access to transportation made it impossible for these patients to get the help they needed.

 There is no public transportation system in Coffee County or surrounding areas. This leads to "no shows" for dental care providers and patients who go without treatment.

 In addition to care and treatment, oral health care education is imperative for patients and providers. As a 2008 alumnae of the Summer Medical and Dental Education Program (SMDEP), and now a third-year student at the University of Louisville, my education and training have prepared me to both care for and teach future patients. I intend to devote my career to bridging gaps in oral health care for low-income, rural Alabamans. I plan to open a dental studio in my hometown of Enterprise, and I will welcome low-income patients.

 But many more dental educators and providers are needed to reduce the oral health disparities in Alabama. More dental school educators can help future dentists convey to patients the importance of routine oral health care (and the harm caused by not getting that care). With more providers, better access to public transportation, and providers who can treat Medicaid patients, particularly those who live in rural and underserved communities, we can bridge the gaps in care.

 Providing these elements could greatly help reduce systemic diseases that develop from untreated dental work. It can also serve to reduce patients’ traumatic experiences with dentists, and bring more awareness to the importance of routine oral health care.

 Perhaps easier said than done, but I plan to tackle these programs. I am dedicated to helping bridge these disparities with the help of others in my home community.