

# OMS returns to his native Philippines with mission

*Many AAOMS fellows and members generously help patients in unfortunate circumstances in the United States and abroad. Giving Back is a new, occasional feature that will highlight the volunteerism of oral and maxillofacial surgeons. Send story ideas to AAOMS Editorial Manager Sarah Trotto at [strotto@aaoms.org](mailto:strotto@aaoms.org).*

**A**t a young age, Aldrich Sy, DDS, MD, was exposed to poverty in his native Philippines. After moving to the United States as a child, he vowed to return to his homeland to help those in need.

After a recent mission trip, Dr. Sy was able to fulfill that promise.

“My parents made sure that my siblings and I saw the reality of the situation and planted in our minds the seeds of giving back,” he said. “I don’t think it is a coincidence that four out of the five of us became doctors.”

Earlier this year, Dr. Sy joined a weeklong journey with Uplift Internationale, a nonprofit organization focused on treating facial deformities. Founded in 1989 by OMS and Philippine native Dr. Jaime Yrastorza, Uplift makes annual trips with a team of medical professionals and outreach volunteers to the Philippines.

Dr. Sy learned of the organization at an AAOMS Annual Meeting when ABOMS Past President Dr. Tom Williams gave a presentation on his own mission trip. The passion of the participating surgeons impressed Dr. Sy.

“It was a privilege I got this opportunity with Uplift to put all those years of studying and training to use,” he said.

With ABOMS Past Presidents Drs. James Bertz and Williams, fellow OMSs Drs. Nagi Demian and Karen Tucker, two plastic surgeons and one ENT, the 51-person team conducted nearly 90 procedures, including primary and secondary cleft lip/palate repair, pharyngoplasties, fistula closures and rhinoplasties.

The group also provided education to local doctors and nurses and donated eyeglasses and other goods.

“The pedigree of the surgeons who volunteered was impressive to say the least,” Dr. Sy said. “For example, Dr. Bertz was trained by, and operated with, Dr. Ralph Millard (of the famous Millard rotation flap) himself. Not to mention there were two Past Presidents of ABOMS volunteering. How much more impressive can it get than that?”

Although the mission to Naga City, Philippines, marked Dr. Sy’s first cleft lip and palate outreach trip, he has remained active in global and domestic outreach throughout his career.

He has volunteered in such places as Honduras when he was a dental student at UCLA and assisted homeless children in Las Vegas, Nev., during his college spring break. When he was a medical student at UC Davis, Dr. Sy studied in South America to learn about its healthcare system.



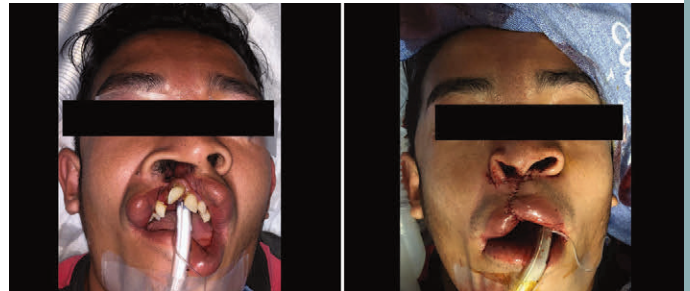
*From left: Day one of the waiting room with patients being screened before seeing pediatrics and anesthesia. Dr. Sy with a postop patient and the patient’s mother.*



# to repair clefts and other facial deformities



*Clockwise from top: Before and after images of patients. The OMS team (from left): Dr. Sy, ABOMS Past President Dr. Tom Williams, Dr. Nagi Demian, Dr. Karen Tucker and ABOMS Past President Dr. James Bertz (seated). Dr. Sy and Dr. Bertz in the pre-op.*



Despite his passion for volunteering, Dr. Sy acknowledges the obligations and commitments of running a practice can act as an impediment to serving.

“Having just recently graduated from residency with all these student loans, raising two toddlers and living in one of the most expensive markets in San Francisco, it was very easy to just keep your nose to the grindstone,” he said. “In fact, one financial planner recommended against it and advised I delay until I was more established.”

Yet, reading about other OMSs’ outreach motivated Dr. Sy to participate early in his career.

“The compassion these surgeons displayed was inspiring and served as constant encouragement to follow my instinct,” he said. “A one-hour procedure can be so life-changing. The sooner people get that opportunity, the sooner they can have a chance. I could not delay it.”

During the mission, Dr. Sy met a man in his 20s who was ostracized by society for having a rather large cleft lip. After assisting in the repair of the man’s face, Dr. Sy – who speaks the native language – recalled the mother whispering in her son’s ear: “May pag-asa ka na” (translated as, “You have a chance now”).

“For the younger surgeons who are on the fence, I would strongly encourage them to serve, even if they are just starting their career,” said Dr. Sy, who completed the



University of California, San Francisco’s residency program in 2016, owns a private practice in Daly City, Calif., and works at the county hospital. “The benefits go far beyond anything objectively measurable.”

Dr. Sy had already committed to the trip next year and said he looks forward to continuing the “investment in people and humanity.” ■