



# SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



OUR 150TH YEAR

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2006

50¢

THANKS TO AN S.B. DENTIST AND A SHIPPING CONTAINER TURNED TREATMENT CENTER, AFGHANS WILL SOON HAVE

## A reason to smile



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

Dr. James Rolfe checks some of the equipment in the shipping container he has turned into a dental clinic.

### HOW TO HELP

The Afghanistan Dental Relief Project will open its shipping container clinic to the public from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at the industrial yard at 211 E. Yanonali St.

For more information, visit [www.adrpic.org](http://www.adrpic.org), or call 963-2329.

By **THOMAS SCHULTZ**  
NEWS-PRESS STAFF WRITER

They double as homes — cut and stacked into modern designs. But rarely, if ever, has the efficient allure of a steel shipping container inspired the construction of a dental office.

Santa Barbara dentist James Rolfe has invested hundreds of hours and tens of thousands of dollars in the past year turning an empty 40-foot steel shell into a fully functional exam suite and laboratory.

With the job nearly done, he spoke this week about the next phase of his project — sending the big beige box to Afghanistan.

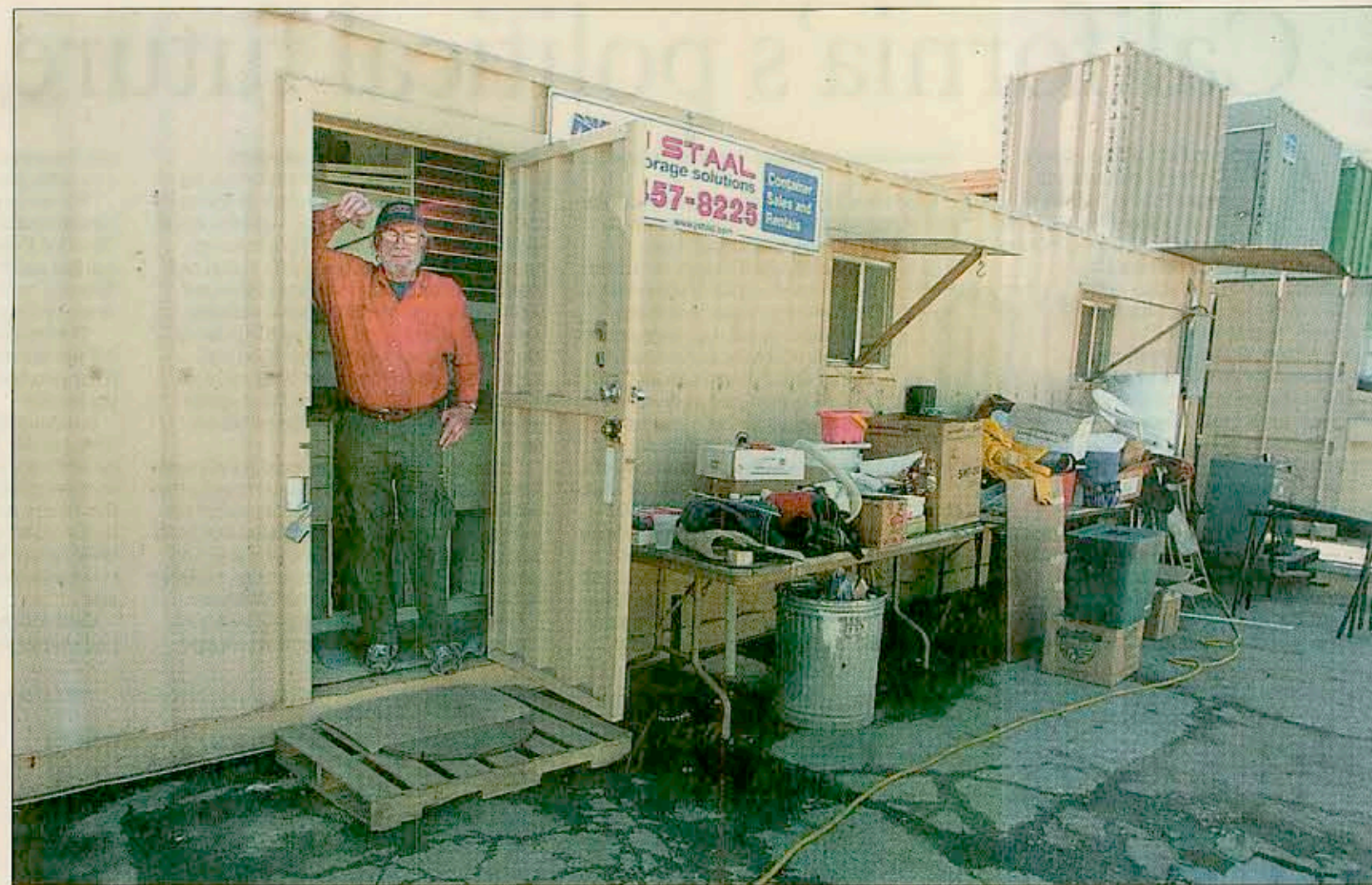
Dr. Rolfe sees it as the cornerstone of a future treatment and education facility on vacant land recently provided by the Afghan government in the capital, Kabul. In a country where



The New York Times  
TOM DE WALT / NEWS-PRESS

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SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS FROM THE FRONT WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2006



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS

Dr. James Rolfe envisions the clinic he created out of a shipping container as the centerpiece of a treatment and education facility on land provided by the Afghan government in Kabul. Below, the word "Dream" is painted in English and Farsi inside the clinic.

## Afghan dentists in short supply

### CLINIC

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modern dentistry is nearly nonexistent and patients regularly suffer abscessed teeth, he envisions a facility where orphans can learn hygienist and technician skills.

"Everything works," Dr. Rolfe said during a brief tour of his brainchild at its current home in a Funk Zone industrial yard. "It'll be out of here before you know it."

Squeezing down the clinic's narrow hall, past a row of sinks and exam "rooms" with fold-out tools, is reminiscent of using the restroom on an airplane, or camping aboard an old Volkswagen bus.

Yet the 320-square-foot space holds the promise of endless good works, with the words "Dream," "Peace" and "Love" painted in English and Farsi on its cream-colored walls. Of the nearly 30 million people in Afghanistan, similar in population to California, only 134 are dentists, Dr. Rolfe said.

By comparison, the California Dental Association represents more than 20,000 dentists, according to its Web site.

Construction on the clinic started in January 2005. It now holds three standard dental chairs, plus X-ray equipment, a sterilization room, a lab and enough gear for cleanings, extractions or any other procedures—including complex surgeries offered locally by the enthusiastic tooth doctor at his regular office near the Lobero Theatre.

Dr. Rolfe, founder of the Santa Barbara-based nonprofit Afghanistan Dental Relief Project Inc., will hold a two-day open house at the container on Saturday and Sunday.

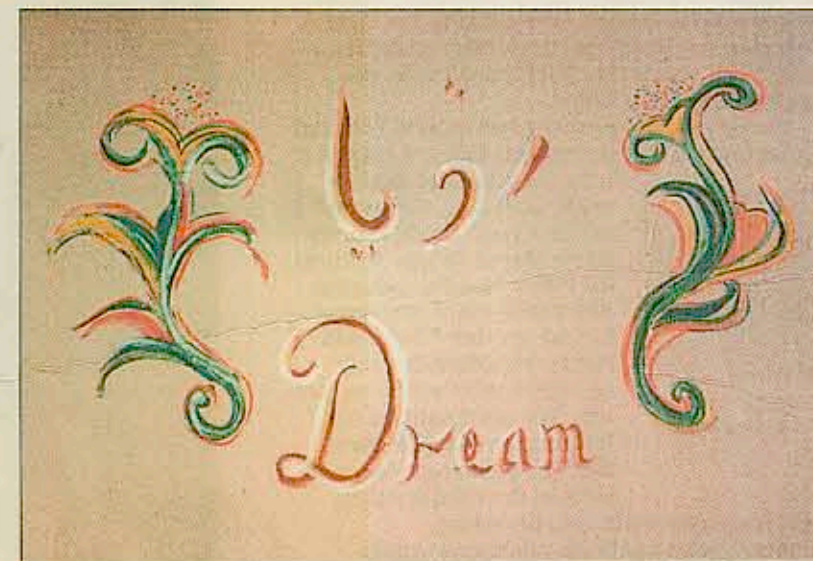
"I just keep working hard and putting all my money into it," he said, adding that J Staal Storage Solutions provided free rent and American Tooth Industries in Oxnard donated \$122,000 worth of false teeth—enough for 35,000 sets.

He has invested \$140,000 of his own, and hopes to raise some funds to cover future costs, including shipping.

In addition, local aerospace engineer Scott Savre worked hundreds of volunteer hours on the box, Dr. Rolfe said.

The box will not go alone, but will travel in as few as three weeks with a second container of similar size packed floor to ceiling with enough equipment for 12 more dental exam rooms—and more than 1,200 pairs of children's shoes.

Dr. Rolfe is looking forward to his third trip to Afghanistan, the first in a series he has planned to bring the clinic online. His last trip took place when he led two helpers from Santa Barbara to Kabul to treat patients and lay groundwork for the clinic in May



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**Dr. James Rolfe,**

founder of the Afghanistan Dental Relief Project Inc., on the clinic he created to be shipped to Afghanistan

2004. His first trip, to treat orphans in Wardak province, was in October 2003.

The bearded sexagenarian said he intends to find two more containers in Afghanistan and use all four to form a quadrangle. A permanent structure with a roof would cover the central area.

Eventually, permanent buildings will rise, too, he said, to accommodate a growing list of dentists eager to rotate in and out on volunteer missions. Once permanent additions are complete, the containers can be shipped to another Afghan town or city and the process started anew.

Assuming the containers arrive safely, they will run off a diesel generator or local electricity. The main one holds a heated and pressurized water system.

Although a success on its own merits, Dr. Rolfe said his October 2003 trip — inspired by concerns that Americans would abandon promises to help Afghanistan — had a downside. He learned that in a country with thousands of orphans, merely treating people on his own would not make a big enough difference.

So his strategy grew broader, hence the emphasis on training.

A native of Boise, Idaho, Dr. Rolfe came to Santa Barbara County in 1974 as a member of the Sunburst Commune and worked as the dentist there, using diesel power miles from the nearest road. He left the commune in 1982, set up shop in Santa Barbara and has operated a private practice since.

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