

James Rolfe taking shipping container filled with equipment to Afghanistan Steel box being transformed into dental clinic



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS

Scott Savre opens boxes of building materials being used to turn an ordinary shipping container into a \$30,000 dental clinic.

By **THOMAS SCHULTZ**
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Space is a commodity and efficiency is key as Santa Barbara dentist James Rolfe turns an empty 40-foot shipping container into a fully functional dental clinic bound for Afghanistan.

Dusty craftsmen pour over the beige steel unit. A whirl of power tools fills the sturdy box, unceremoniously tucked into a Funk Zone industrial yard along East Yanonali Street.

Construction started two weeks ago. When finished, the \$30,000 clinic will hold three standard dental chairs and as many X-ray machines, a sterilization room, a lab and enough equipment for cleanings, extractions or any other procedures — including complex surgeries offered locally by the

HOW TO HELP

The Afghanistan Dental Relief Project seeks carpenters, plumbers, electricians and flooring specialists to help build its shipping container clinic. The project also seeks financial assistance and a 5-kw to 10-kw diesel generator. For more information, visit www.adrpinc.org online or call 963-2329.

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Clinic seeds education program

■ DENTISTRY

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enthusiastic tooth doctor at his regular office near the Lobero Theatre.

"They don't have any access to care" in Afghanistan, Dr. Rolfe said. "We are better off than they are. We just want to help."

He plans to return to Kabul in April for two weeks to meet the 320-square-foot container there, leading a team of 16 participants all paying their own way to help get the free clinic up and running. The entourage will include four other dentists, at least one dental assistant, hygienists, skilled laborers and at least one videographer to document it all.

This is Dr. Rolfe's third trip to the country since he led two helpers to Kabul to treat patients and lay groundwork for the clinic last May. His first trip, to treat orphans in Wardack Province, was in October 2003.

As founder of the locally based nonprofit Afghanistan Dental Relief Project Inc., the bearded 65-year-old aims to establish a permanent dentistry education program in the war-torn nation.

Hence the shipping container, envisioned as that program's first home base.

The relief workers will travel for two days to Kabul by air.

The 8-foot-high container, and another one of similar size filled with supplies, will travel one of two likely routes.

The first and perhaps most secure option is to send them by boat to Rotterdam. Crews would then lift them onto a train bound for southern Russia, where they would then travel by truck through Uzbekistan to Kabul.

The quicker option is moving the containers by boat to Pakistan, where they would then be trucked to Kabul. But, as Dr. Rolfe noted, "Containers have a habit of disappearing in Pakistan."

Assuming the clinic arrives safely, it will run off a diesel generator and feature a pressurized water system.

A detached outhouse is planned.

The unit will stay in Afghanistan permanently.

"Eventually, it will be a full-time facility," Dr. Rolfe said last week, adding his organization was close to buying a plot of land for it.

Special steel plates that lock from the inside cover the clinic windows, Dr. Rolfe noted. "Not too keep out bullets, or anything like that, but to discourage theft."

The 300-pound front door cannot be removed even if its hinges are cut, thanks to special posts along the door's edge that sink into the clinic wall. Fully outfitted, the clinic will weigh about 20,000 pounds.

One of the group's goals, he said, is to show the Afghan government that it can be done. Another is forming a funding partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development or with the United Nations.

To generate funds to operate and expand, the clinic periodically will serve paying foreigners in Kabul, who must otherwise fly to Dubai for dental



RAFAEL MALDONADO / NEWS-PRESS PHOTOS



Above, Santa Barbara dentist James Rolfe holds a flashlight as Scott Savre, left, and Patrick Shipp work on the dental clinic project. "We are better off than they are. We just want to help," says Dr. Rolfe, also shown at left.

care, Dr. Rolfe said. "They are going to be really enthusiastic."

Royeen Nesari, 27, a junior at the UC San Francisco dental school, recently has helped Dr. Rolfe gather resources and promote awareness of the trip to alumni. Mr. Nesari fled Kabul with his family in 1983, after his father was killed fighting the Soviets, who invaded Afghanistan in 1979 and withdrew in 1988.

"I feel like it is my duty to help," said Mr. Nesari, who grew up in Modesto and has never returned to his homeland. He won't make the April trip, but would like to join the relief project after graduation. "Students are discouraged as far as liability issues through our school. Also, financially, the funding is not available for me at this point."

Still, he said, "We have the ear of the alumni. We want to let them know this project exists."

Afghanistan has few dentists, and they work without the latest technology.

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, with an emphasis on training Afghan citizens in dental care.

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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