

Fleeing Haiti as a child, Fidelito Gabriel grew up in Dorchester, Mass., where he now practices dentistry.



The **Ripple** Effect

Helped by a scholarship, a Boston dentist cares for a community in need

By Leslie Friday

MARIA DEPINA, A NATIVE of Cape Verde, rises from the plastic-covered couch and shakes the hand of the dentist she calls her “son.”

Fidelito Gabriel, dressed in a spotless white jacket and tie, has been Depina’s dentist for nine years, and through fillings and root canals and routine cleanings, has been, she says, more concerned with the quality of care than with how much he’s paid for it. One time Gabriel charged her nothing for the filling he did on her son.

“Dr. Gabriel has a good heart,” Depina says. “He’s willing to do things for free just to make you happy.”

Gabriel came to the United States from Haiti more than two decades ago, a skinny kid fleeing the aftermath of a popular uprising in the Western hemisphere’s poorest country. Here, his hard work earned him the favor of teachers and men-

tors, a full-ride scholarship to BU, a dental degree, and eventually his own practice, which he co-owns with his father and which has offices in Dorchester and Jamaica Plain, Mass.

These days, Gabriel (SAR’01, SDM’05) is working hard to provide others with the kind of help he was given. He supports his mother and her family in Haiti, travels on dental missions to the Dominican Republic and his home country, is a board member of a local charter school, and mentors the next generation of dentists in Boston. And last spring, he joined the Massachusetts Army National Guard.

Back in Haiti, the young Gabriel had never planned to become a dentist. “All I wanted to do is become a scientist who can work on cancer and find a cure,” he says. While his father worked in Port-au-Prince,

Gabriel and his brothers and sisters lived with their mother in the village of La Cour Jules.

When Gabriel was of age, he went to school in the capital, where everything changed drastically with the 1986 uprising that ousted President Jean-Claude Duvalier. Gabriel’s father fled to the United States, planning to bring his family once he was settled. But when he saw the violence in Haiti, broadcast nightly on American television, he knew he couldn’t wait. He sent for them—first his youngest daughter, then his three oldest children, including Gabriel, in 1988.

GROWING UP EARLY

They all lived with his father and his new American wife and her children on Intervale Avenue, one of the toughest streets in Dorchester. Violence and shootings were

commonplace. Gabriel knew no one and spoke no English. Just eight at the time, Gabriel quickly realized that even though his family was living in a wealthy country, they were not rich. In some ways, things had been better in Haiti.

As his family bounced from Dorchester to Roxbury and back again—each time moving to a safer neighborhood, Gabriel tested into

The Boston High School Scholars program gave Gabriel a full scholarship to Sargent College.

better public schools. At West Roxbury High School, he joined Project Success, a program that introduces inner-city children to the medical professions. He hoped to work with cancer researchers, but the project's organizers assigned him—much to his chagrin—to the pancreas laboratory at Beth Israel Deaconess Hospital.

With encouragement from high school teachers, Gabriel applied for a full scholarship through the Boston High School Scholars program (see page 78) to Sargent College, where he worked in the muscle biology laboratory of Susan Kandarian, a professor of health sciences. Gabriel maintained cell cultures, meticulously stored plasmid DNA for researchers and doctoral students, and conducted research examining the cause of muscle atrophy, funded by BU's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (see page 35).

"He had a seriousness of purpose that other 19- and 20-year-olds don't tend to have," recalls Kandarian. "He really got that we were making discoveries like any other lab to really contribute to our understanding of biology."

Working in Kandarian's lab reinforced his love for science, but he also learned in talking to doctoral students that the path to a PhD often took longer than anticipated. And he knew that family back in Haiti needed money. "In my third year in college,

I thought maybe trying to cure cancer is very important, but it's not what I need to do," he says. Gabriel was accepted to BU's School of Dental Medicine. When he registered, he says he promised himself, "I would try it for one year, and if I didn't like it, I'd dump it because I know I love cancer research."

He cruised through his first year and even helped tutor his classmates. That summer, he enrolled in the Applied Professional Experience program, which sends first-year dental students to private or public practices for an eight-week internship. He was assigned to the Codman Square Health Center, where the majority of patients

are Haitian. He spoke their language, understood what it was like to be Haitian in America, and knew the answers to more than their dental questions. He knew also that what he was doing was badly needed.

Gabriel stayed at Codman after graduation and in 2009 joined Forest Hills Dental Office, which his father ran and they later bought together. Many of their clients are low-income, have state health insurance, and come from Central America, Haiti, or other parts of the Caribbean.

"Before they can pay for dental care," Gabriel says, "they have a lot of other things to consider: feeding their families, paying bills, taking care of elders. In our community, most of us don't just care for ourselves; we care for elders and other people in our families."

MISSIONS, MILITARY, AND MENTORSHIP

Gabriel often works with patients to establish payment plans for uninsured care, counsels them on which insurance best serves their needs, and refers them to other dentists for specialized care. He also regularly sends money to his mother and her family in Haiti and pays his younger brother's rent and college loans.

For the past four summers, he has traveled with the Hispanic Dental Association to Haiti or the Dominican Republic, where he gives free preventive and restorative

care to hundreds of poor patients—some of whom have never visited a dentist. Gabriel is often part of the restorative team. "We try to prevent large cavities from becoming an infection to help them preserve the smile," he says.

His group has also spoken with members of the Dominican Republic's public health community about how to introduce fluoride into people's diet in table salt.

Last spring Gabriel added another title to his name: captain. He joined the Massachusetts Army National Guard's Dental Corps, serving one weekend a month and 15 days during the summer supervising contracted dentists who care for service members at a handful of locations around Boston. His three-year commitment could include occasional deployments overseas.

He also joined the board of trustees of the Smith Leadership Academy, a charter middle school in the Fields Corner neighborhood of Dorchester that focuses on leadership and character development. Board chairman Kevin Tarpley says he recruited Gabriel because of his science background and his personal story, describing him as humble, a deep thinker, and a team player. "It's great when we introduce board members to the students," many of whom come from Haiti, "because they can say, 'Look, I can become a dentist,'" Tarpley says. That message resonated with Gabriel, who is on the development committee and academic excellence committee.

Gabriel also mentors dental students he meets at the Annual Haitian Health Career Seminar held at the School of Medicine, coaching them on study habits, organizational skills, classes, and dental techniques. Sheina Jean-Marie (MED'08) says he mentored her through the admission process to Tufts School of Dental Medicine, and they regularly chatted whenever she had questions about the profession. "It was refreshing to speak with someone who knew the experience and was able to walk you through every step of the way," she says.

"Mentoring helped me get where I am right now," Gabriel says. "I was a good student, but if I didn't have people who were interested in me and showed me the way to go so that I could become a dentist, I probably wouldn't have made it."