In December 2012, I had the honour of accompanying Dr Linda Greenwall of the Dental Wellness Trust and friends to the Afrika Tikkun community centre in the Delft township of Cape Town to provide some basic oral health advice.

In an area that is plagued by alarmingly high levels of unemployment, poor access to health care, basic sanitation and good nutrition not to mention the growing number of orphaned children, centres such as Afrika Tikkun are essential in providing basic support and services to the local community.

Afrika Tikkun focuses primarily on children and offers wonderful opportunities for the kids to play, learn, eat and have fun in a safe and friendly environment. The centre goes much further than that though, providing food, healthcare and other basic services to the families of these children, reaching out to over 8,000 members of the community.

With so many barriers to good oral hygiene such as education and finances, our goal was to teach some of those children just how easy it is to brush their teeth as well as a few basic facts about the dangers of too many sweets, chocolates and fizzy drinks. By empowering the children with this basic information, something we all take for granted, it will hopefully allow them to look after their own oral health and ultimately their general well being.
As we arrived at the centre, we were greeted by more than 250 children aged four to 16 and community workers who seemed a little curious as to why we were there. However as we unloaded the bags of toothbrushes and toothpastes that had been donated, it soon became apparent.

Following a demonstration by Dr Greenwall with some fun participation from the children using the giant toothbrush and plastic teeth, we split into groups where each child was given a toothbrush and a smear of toothpaste to practice with.

This was a wonderful opportunity to interact with the kids and also put into practice some of the basic community outreach training I have received while at university. Some of them were so young they couldn’t quite hold the toothbrushes properly but it was wonderful to watch as the older children in the group helped the younger ones. This was actually very touching as it dawned on me that many of these children were in fact orphans and so rely heavily on their friends and siblings to look after them.

After our toothbrushing sessions and an extremely heartfelt thank you from the kids, we were treated to a tour of this incredible community centre to see just how it helps support over 8,000 members from the local community. Working in extremely difficult conditions with limited funds resources, the ladies who run the centre are miracle workers. They truly are inspirational people who make a positive difference to the children’s lives every day.

Although there is some government support for the centre, Afrika Tikkun is largely funded by corporate donors and individual philanthropists from around the world and it is quite amazing to see just how effective these are. We often question if our donations really make it to the grassroots level or just get eaten up in administration fees but this centre is evidence that it does, and it is making a difference every day.

I am incredibly grateful to Dr Greenwall for inviting me with as part of the DWT and would certainly recommend for anybody who has the opportunity, to get in touch with Linda to visit one of the centres or even just lend their support as it really does go a long way. It was a wonderful experience but one that only makes me more eager to continue to support the DWT in their aim to improve the oral health of children such as those at Afrika Tikkun.