

The mensch list 2014



Dr. Jay Grossman. All photos by David Miller

Last month, for our 10th annual mensch list, we invited your nominations of extraordinary volunteers in our community, and once again the outpouring of suggestions of amazing people was overwhelming. This list could have been much longer — what we offer here is just a sampling of the extraordinary people who give so much to make the world a better place. If your nominees were not included this time, please remember, we'd love to see those names, and more, again next year. We are inspired by all of these stories and highlight this list of mensches each year to motivate us all to live up to their example.

He Gives Homeless Something to Smile About

by Naomi Pfefferman, Arts & Entertainment Editor

In 1991, Dr. Jay Grossman was waiting at a stoplight in West Los Angeles when he spotted a bedraggled homeless veteran who was missing his front teeth. The dentist was a bit hesitant as he reached into his wallet to give the man a handout; he worried that the veteran might spend the money on drugs or alcohol instead of food or shelter. "But then I thought, 'Where is the tzedakah in that?'"

Grossman, 51, said in his Brentwood office recently. "So instead of a dollar, I gave him my business card. I said, 'Let me see what I can do about getting you out of pain and replacing those missing teeth so you can function by eating and look good for a job interview. That'll give you more benefit than my giving you a buck.'"

Grossman continued giving his business card to other homeless people, and, in 1992, he enlisted the Western Los Angeles Dental Society to participate in his new program, Homeless Not Toothless, which would offer free dental care to the needy in the hope that the service might help patients land work and re-enter society. "It's tough to get a job if you're in pain or missing your front teeth," Grossman said.

Over the past 24 years, Homeless Not Toothless has treated tens of thousands of patients, with \$2 million in work provided by Grossman alone. Today, more than 100 dentists volunteer to serve individuals screened and recommended by the nonprofit Venice Family Clinic, at sober living facilities and elsewhere. To qualify, patients must be sober and actively looking for work.

Grossman — a graduate of New York University's dental school — said the primary inspiration for his charitable work comes from the dentist who worked on his teeth at low cost during his low-income childhood in New York. "Dr. Mike was a Jewish dentist working in a Puerto Rican neighborhood," said Grossman, who served as president of his Young Judea region in high school and attended his freshman year of college at Hebrew University. "He always said he believed that everybody deserves dental care whether they can afford it or not."

Grossman's pro bono patients have included an elderly ex-convict who had no teeth and had had to survive on a liquid diet for 40 years; a 5-year-old whose teeth were so blackened by decay that he had been ridiculed at school; and a 50-year-old, John, who had spiraled into homelessness as a result of a methamphetamine addiction, losing his construction business and his family in the process. Grossman not only cured John's severe tooth pain by extracting his teeth and providing him with a full set of dentures, he also allowed John to live in his Malibu Hills home for two years while John worked in construction. When the dentist learned that John hadn't seen his 17-year-old son for 15 years, he surprised John by arranging to fly the teenager to Los Angeles; then Grossman invited the youth to stay at his home for an entire summer.

In 2013, Homeless Not Toothless began working with foster-care children after actress Sharon Stone asked Grossman to provide services through her Planet Hope charity and Los Angeles County; last year, Homeless Not Toothless dentists saw 13,000 foster kids ages 5 to 18 "whose teeth were often filled with rot and decay due to neglect," Grossman said.

His goal, he says, is to expand Homeless Not Toothless nationwide: "This is my tikkun olam." by Naomi Pfefferman, Arts & Entertainment Editor



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