



DENTAL HYGIENE STUDENT PROFILE

*Bisera Van Cott, RDH, '16**Fast-Track AAS*

WHEN BISERA VAN COTT came to New York in 2004, she planned to stay for one year and then return to her hometown of Podgorica, the capital of Montenegro, in the Balkans. At the time, Bisera was 25 years old and had come to the US via an exchange program to work as an au pair and to experience New York. A month before she was to fly home, she met a Manhattan dentist in need of an office manager/dental assistant. Bisera, who had worked for four years as a dental assistant in an oral surgeon's office in Montenegro, was offered the office manager/dental assistant position in New York City. She immediately decided to accept the offer and canceled her flight home.

Flash forward 12 years to find Bisera among the first class of 14 students to graduate from NYU College of Dentistry's 17-month Fast-Track Associate in Applied Science (AAS) degree program, launched in January 2015. The program, the first of its kind in New York State, is designed specifically to enable highly motivated students to gain access to the same innovative, high-quality education as that offered by the traditional two- to three-year course of study, but in a more concentrated period.

Bisera, who at age 14 enrolled in a specialty high school in Montenegro to become a dental lab technician, credits her mother with guiding her toward the dental profession. "My mother saw that I was always working with my hands, doing things such as baking and cooking," says Bisera. "She believed that becoming a dental lab technician would be a good profession for me."

However, Bisera realized early on that working in a lab was too isolating. "I really prefer working with people," she says. After graduating from high school, Bisera participated in a dental assistant internship at a hospital, which paved the way for her first dental assistant job in Montenegro.

When Bisera began her first semester at NYU, she found the transition to student life somewhat daunting. "I had been working in dental offices for a long time, but going back to school was scary at first, especially since English is not my first language," she says.

Bisera is particularly appreciative of the assistance provided by Ms. Megan Murphy, NYU College of Dentistry's dental hygiene student retention

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and academic advising coordinator, whom Bisera credits with helping her acclimate during that first semester. “She was always there for me whenever I needed support,” says Bisera.

The Fast-Track program is challenging in many ways since students do not take any long breaks, and many of them are carrying 10-plus credits per semester,” says Ms. Murphy.

In fall 2015, Bisera and the 13 other inaugural Fast-Track program students merged with the other AAS program students.

“Bisera was able to come into her own as a dental hygiene student when the classes merged,” says Ms. Murphy. “She took advantage of every opportunity to learn and participate in the program, displayed leadership qualities, and connected well with the faculty.”

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For Bisera, a highlight of her dental hygiene education was her participation in the NYU College of Dentistry/Henry Schein Cares Global Student Outreach Program

to Mothuka, Rajasthan, India, in January 2016. In partnership with the Baba Bhagwan Dass Education Society, the NYU team conducted its first school-based oral health outreach program in the region. Bisera was proud to be selected by the dental hygiene faculty as the only dental hygiene student to accompany six NYU Dentistry administrators and faculty who provided oral health education and examinations to the children at the school and periodontal exams to adults.

In addition to the NYU dental team, three capstone project students from NYU’s College of Global Public Health were also on the trip, conducting a community-needs assessment.

“The trip to India was amazing,” says Bisera. “We were working with an extremely poor population in a remote village. I had never worked outside of a high-tech office, and it was such a great experience to work in less than perfect conditions and see that we could still help these patients.”

According to Ms. Rosemary Hays, clinical associate professor of dental hygiene and assistant director of dental hygiene admissions, when she told Bisera that she had been selected to go on the outreach, Bisera responded, “I am so honored that you are sending me.”

“I said to Bisera, ‘You’re hon-

ored? We’re honored to have you go,’” said Professor Hays, who added, “after the trip we could not believe all the accolades Bisera received from the administrators and faculty with whom she had worked. She did a great job and made us very proud.”

Ms. Dianne L. Sefo, clinical instructor and preclinical coordinator of dental hygiene programs, has worked with Bisera in the preclinical course as her course director. “Some people think that a hygienist is just there to scrape plaque and calculus off teeth,” says Ms. Sefo. “But what we really try to promote is good oral health, and Bisera makes that possible by looking at the patient as a whole.”

After graduation, Bisera hopes to work in a dental office where the prevailing philosophy revolves around comprehensive care. “I want to work in an environment where I do not feel rushed, where I can truly help my patients. After all, this is a caring profession, and that is what I like best about it.”

“Bisera really took to heart what it means to be an NYU student,” says Ms. Murphy. She epitomizes the kind of hygienist whom we are proud to graduate. I think that she is going to bring knowledge, warmth, and overall professionalism to all her future endeavors. She cares so much and wants so much to effect change.” ■