

Shared with permission from the Norfolk Daily News

https://norfolkdailynews.com/select/norfolk-native-leads-the-fight-for-oral-health-standards-as-adha-president/article_3151ff33-e0a6-4c9b-8ad9-ba310e3d63e7.html

Norfolk native leads the fight for oral health standards as ADHA president

By BEN DROZD

bdrozd@norfolkdailynews.com

Jun 4, 2025

Erin Haley-Hitz didn't set out to become the face of a national profession. She just wanted to help keep people's teeth healthy.



Courtesy Photo

Norfolk native Erin Haley-Hitz is the president of the American Dental Hygienists' Association, tackling issues that affect millions of Americans.

Now, three decades after graduating from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and earning a bachelor of science degree in dental hygiene, Haley-Hitz is the president of the American Dental Hygienists' Association that represents more than 200,000 registered dental hygienists, tackling issues that affect millions of Americans.

This wasn't always the plan, however.

"I never had that on my radar," Haley-Hitz said. "I saw ways that I can improve the business of the association. ... So that's where it drew me in, was the business side of it. But along the way, I became a strong advocate for my profession, and that started in Nebraska."

Haley-Hitz, a 1991 graduate of Norfolk Catholic High School, has practiced as a hygienist in Nebraska since 1995. Over the years, her focus has shifted.

After years of leadership in the Nebraska Dental Hygienists' Association, she was elected to the national ADHA Board of Directors. From there, she ran for vice president, then president-elect, and now serves in the highly visible role of president of the ADHA.

"I went into this thinking I could improve the business of the association," Haley-Hitz said.

"But as I went along on my journey, I realized that I could influence the next generation of dental hygienists. I could influence the profession for the next generation, hopefully making it better."

Among her top priorities as president this year are preserving fluoride in public water systems and safeguarding the profession from efforts to dilute educational standards.

Haley-Hitz said there is growing misinformation about fluoride, with studies being taken out of context. She said this is putting people at risk and that everyone needs access to safe, clean, fluoridated water to prevent disease.

“Growing up in Norfolk at the time, it was not fluoridated when I grew up there,” Haley-Hitz said. “So when I practiced there for a short time, I saw things that I don't see here in Lincoln, Nebraska.

“There is a difference between water conditions that people are exposed to in their life that can set them up for good things, or set them up for real hardships when it comes to their oral health.”

At the same time, Haley-Hitz and her team are pushing back against legislative attempts in some states to reduce training requirements or allow underqualified individuals to perform hygiene work.

Haley-Hitz points to the links between oral health and serious conditions such as diabetes, stroke, heart disease and Alzheimer's, saying that the work dental hygienists do is important and that the best people are needed for the job.

“We complete close to 3,000 clinical hours of education by the time we've completed a dental hygiene school, and that isn't there to make it hard for us,” Haley-Hitz said. “It's there to protect people that we take care of every day.

“If someone is undereducated or not prepared, they can do harm by not preventing disease in the proper way.”

Although her work now spans the country, Haley-Hitz's passion for mentorship and advocacy didn't begin in a big city — it began in Norfolk. She still returns regularly to Norfolk to visit her father and reconnect with the place she credits for launching her career.

“Never in my wildest dreams did I realize this was where I'd be in my life,” Haley-Hitz said.

“You have no idea who you're going to impact or how you're going to impact your community, but it all comes back to your home. ... Your home community is what kind of builds you, so you have to remember that's where you come from and take that with you wherever you go.”