

Where Prevention Meets Purpose

A volunteer event serving thousands of underserved patients changed Erick Vega's career trajectory forever. Now, he leads with energy and empathy, using prevention as a tool for lasting impact.



Erick Vega, RDH, didn't always picture himself in dentistry. In high school, he planned a future in computer science—until a magnet program changed everything. As a junior, he earned his dental assistant license and stepped into dentistry shortly after graduation. What he didn't expect was how deeply the profession would shape his purpose.

Early on, Erick worked with a philanthropic pediatric dentist in Texas who spent a month each year providing free or low-cost care to underserved communities. During one mission-style event in Kyle, TX, more than 2,000 people showed up for dental, medical, and vision care. Over 50 dentists and students volunteered, along with more than 100 assistants—but only two hygienists were there.

"To see how many people needed extractions and fillings—things we could have prevented—was overwhelming," Erick recalled. "I remember thinking, 'I'm going to become a hygienist because we need this.'"

That moment stayed with him. Every summer since, Erick has taken a week off to volunteer at similar mission events, believing in the importance of reaching patients who might otherwise go without care.

As lead hygienist at a bustling 12-operator practice in Austin, TX, Erick guides a team of five, overseeing schedules, inventory, and training on services from intraoral scanning to whitening. For him, leadership is about energy. Even on the busiest days, he focuses on keeping the team positive and making sure they leave on a good note.

What motivates him is simple. "I genuinely love what I do," Erick said. "Every morning, I wake up knowing I can make a difference."

KINDNESS IN ACTION

That mindset is clear in his work with patients. Erick leads with kindness and positive reinforcement. "Even if they haven't seen a dentist or hygienist in years, the last thing we want is for them to feel judged," he said. "We tell them, 'Hey, you're here now. We're not going to push anything on you that you're not going to want to try.' We just want to show what's easy and manageable."

He also takes prevention seriously, performing oral cancer screenings on every patient. "It's safe, inexpensive, and quick," he said. "Globally, we haven't reduced oral cancer statistics like we have for other cancers. But if we can do these screenings, it can prevent more extensive treatment for our patients."

For Erick, dental hygiene isn't just a career—it's a vehicle for access, dignity, and lasting change.

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