Dr. Ken Berg never dreamed of becoming a dentist when he was growing up. That was on a small, Yakima Valley farm in the 1930s. There was no running water, no electricity. His father quit school in the fourth grade to help his parents on the farm, was self-educated and didn’t believe in college.

“It just wasn’t in our lifestyle for anyone to go to college,” Berg says. But his mother wanted him to go. She encouraged him, and spoke often of a dentist in town. “She thought that would be a good thing to do,” Berg says.

At his mother’s urging, he attended the Oregon Dental School (now part of Oregon Health & Sciences University) and studied dentistry. The impact a college education has had on his life is ever present in his mind. “I’m very fortunate,” Berg says.

A sense of gratitude and appreciation defines Berg’s life long motivation to volunteer his time and give back to his community, particularly through his career as a dentist in private practice and as an instructor at the OHSU School of Dentistry helping to teach generations of young dentists.

He fervently believes that eventually, every Oregonian will get the dental care they need—in part because of the Dental Foundation of Oregon’s work and the volunteerism of the state’s dentists.

Berg and his wife, Susan, have been major supporters of the Dental Foundation of Oregon since Berg helped start the Foundation in 1982. Although Berg is retired from private practice, he continues working to increase the Foundation’s presence throughout Oregon and convince the state’s dental community to become involved.

Susan says they don’t really think about why they are involved philanthropically, or the larger philosophical beliefs driving their volunteerism. “I just feel like we should,” she says.

The Bergs recently became members of the Foundation’s Cornerstone Society, which allows people to include the Foundation in their estate planning. “It is a great way to give back to our profession,” Berg says. “We know there will always be a need for helping underserved children, and a need for the dental foundation.

Berg thinks it’s vital that every dentist support the Foundation. Not only would their support help promote the profession and be “good PR” for dentistry, it would help alleviate pain and suffering of those who don’t regularly access dental care.

“The Dental Foundation is...trying hand over fist to get good dental care to young people in all parts of the state,” Susan says.

Dr. Berg knows that many dentists provide charity care in their office, but it’s not enough to fill the need. Particularly vexing to Berg is the fact that Oregon’s children experience some of the worst dental health in the nation due to poverty and geographic barriers. This prompted the Foundation to build the Tooth Taxi in late 2008 to take dental care and education directly to children who need it most in their schools all over Oregon.

“The Tooth Taxi is an amazing development for the Foundation, and for the state,” Berg says. “With the mobile dental clinic and its full-time dentist and staff, we’re able to make a big difference for thousands of children.”

But the Tooth Taxi can only be in one place at one time, and Berg knows that long-term solutions need to be addressed including implementing oral health education in schools, promoting healthy eating habits, fluoridating community water, and enticing dentists to work in Oregon’s rural areas.

Those solutions can only come to fruition, Berg thinks, with active involvement from the dental profession—because individuals coming together to tackle a large, statewide problem can make a big difference.

“There’s still a lot more work that needs to be done,” Berg says. “And that’s what The Dental Foundation of Oregon will be working on for many, many years. That is why Susan and I joined the Cornerstone Society. We want to leave a legacy through our estate and help secure the future of the DFO, to help improve the oral health of Oregon’s children for generations to come.”

For information about joining the DFO’s Cornerstone Society visit the DFO website www.SmileOnOregon.org or call Judy Edgerly 503-594-0880.