

A tooth fairy with a mission

By Tiffany Woods

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SANTIAGO—Eliana Vargas, a 50-year-old, low-income Chilean homemaker, lost her smile 15 years ago when secret police arrested her in the street and tortured her because she organized soup kitchens during part of Gen. Augusto Pinochet's 1973-1990 dictatorship, she says.

"They beat me up and knocked out my teeth," she says, only moving her lips enough to talk but not enough to reveal the gaps in her mouth.

Since then, she says, her self-esteem has dwindled, she has had to grind up certain foods in a blender, and has felt like an outcast because she has not been able to afford to fix her teeth.

"I have had a terrible quality of life. I hardly ever laugh. It has been hard for me to integrate myself into society. When I walk into an office to run an errand, I am afraid to speak. I try not to make eye contact because I am embarrassed."

That will change if Luisa Duran has her way. Duran is the wife of Chilean President Ricardo Lagos, and Vargas is the first woman to be promised dental work under the first lady's "Woman's Smile" campaign.

In August, Duran, along with the Women's Promotion and Development Foundation (Prodemu), the state-owned Banco del Estado and a group of dentists, launched the nationwide program, which aims to "build smiles" by the end of November 2001 for thousands of low-income women with missing or severely damaged teeth. The program reduces the costs of dental work that would have been beyond their financial reach. At least 17,000 women have signed up, said Ana Ma-

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Eliana Vargas

ria Alvarez, a technical adviser for the program.

Depending on the severity of a woman's dental problems, the treatment will cost between \$140 and \$250 per person, about five times less than what it would cost in a private clinic, said Ricardo Muza, president of Chile's Association of Surgical Dentists.

Those who cannot afford the full cost can finance the procedure with special loans from Banco del Estado. Donations will be used to pay for treatment for women in extreme poverty. The first contribution came from the coins that visitors tossed into a courtyard fountain at La Moneda, the presidential palace. Chileans living abroad have expressed a strong desire to help as well, Duran said.

She got the idea for the program after having helped a friend of her daughter's.

"They were going to pull [the friend's] teeth and she was not going to be able to work. It always stuck in my mind. Later, during the presidential campaign I saw so many women with this problem and I thought that we must help them or else they would not find work," Duran said.

Dental work is a luxury for many of Chile's 15 million residents because not all private health care plans cover it, viewing preventive treatment such



as teeth cleanings as not essential.

Plagued by low wages and poor infrastructure, the state-run health care system has its own deficiencies because of a shortage of dentists, Muza said. About 7,000 dentists work in Chile, of which about 2,100 perform services in the public sector. But not all of those on the public payroll are full time, he said.

With few dentists, people have been known to wake at the crack of dawn to secure a spot in line at public clinics, but those who do not have the time to wait in queues simply forgo treatment and let their teeth rot, Muza said.

"I ate a lot of sweets when I was a child," said Patricia Ahumada, a 39-year-old homemaker who hopes to obtain a set of dentures for her completely bare gums and to one day be able to bite into a piece of steak. "It is disgusting eating ground-up food," she said.

For those without the financial means, paying the rent can take priority over buying toothpaste, getting a cavity filled and eating food that builds strong teeth and bones.

"I never drink milk. I save it for the children," said Maria Elizabeth Millar, 39, an unemployed mother of three, as she waited in line to sign up for the program, which she hopes will fix what

Photos for the Tribune by Tiffany Woods

Eliana Vargas (above), at the Women's Promotion and Development Foundation in Santiago, Chile, and Patricia Ahumada (left) are receiving dental care under the "Woman's Smile" program.

her son calls her "ugly, purple tooth."

Many of the women who will benefit are homemakers or maids who earn close to the monthly minimum wage, which is just under \$200. Some have had difficulty finding jobs in a society that values beauty. Some cover their asymmetrical smiles with their hands, are embarrassed to accompany their families in public and suffer painful, swollen gums.

"In general, they cannot obtain any job that requires them to attend to the public," Duran said. When it comes down to a person who has teeth and one who does not, the person with teeth is always going to be chosen. It is a problem of discrimination. There are many women who have told me that they lost their jobs when they lost their teeth."

Marta Diaz, a 53-year-old mother of five, knows the feeling.

"I have been turned down for many jobs," she said, although she eventually found part-time work as a maid. The last time she visited a dentist was six years ago. Today, only two front teeth can be seen protruding from her upper jaw.

"My employer always tells me to fix my teeth, but I tell her that I cannot because I do not have the money," Diaz said.

"They call me the old lady without teeth," said Nieves Fontalba, 36, after signing up for the program. "When you go to a party and see others with teeth, it is as though you are not worth anything unless you have teeth as well. I do not accompany my husband because I am embarrassed. I cannot laugh freely. When my friends laugh, I hide."

For the time being, many Chilean women are imagining the day when they can look in the mirror and smile.

"My children say that I will be born again," Vargas said. "When my teeth are fixed, I am going to laugh as hard as I can."