

SNAPSHOT

NAME:

Joel Egnater

AGE: 50

HOMETOWN: Southfield, Michigan

SPH DEGREE PROGRAM:

MPH, On Job/On Campus Program

GRADUATING CLASS: 2006

PREVIOUS DEGREES:

BA in History of Art, 1977; DDS, 1983

A year and a half ago, you visited Capetown, South Africa, and the experience changed your life. You've now bought a house there and intend to move to South Africa someday. Why?

A few days after I got back from that trip, in November 2003, I decided to form a dental foundation. The idea is to outfit Winnebagos as dental clinics, use dental students and volunteer dentists, and drive them into the Capetown flats—that's what they call the slums. The most pressing reason for doing this is that simple infections will kill people with HIV and no medical treatment. The HIV rate in the flats is anywhere from 20 to 90%. Even a toothache can kill somebody there.

What in your background prepared you for this kind of undertaking?

I'm a volunteer here in Michigan for a lot of things. I'm a director of the south-eastern Michigan HIV/AIDS Coalition, I'm involved with HIV/AIDS Partnership of Michigan and Wellness House, and I have a very large, HIV-inclusive dental practice. I realized—working with so many of my fragile patients—that little things kill them. So I thought, well, how would you get dentistry to the people? And what would you do if you did? Just cleaning up people's teeth and taking them out is going to be enough, maybe, to prolong somebody's life long



Joel Egnater with his dog, Millie.

enough until they can get on some meds. But there's no way you could get them into a clinic. So I'm going to start with one Winnebago.

Why did you enroll in Michigan's On Job/On Campus program?

I really didn't have any resources and needed background on how these things work, so I started calling public health schools. Having been out of school so long, and knowing how highly thought of Michigan's program is—not only in the United States but around the world—I was hesitant to apply. After 23 years out of any collegiate environment, frankly, I was frightened to jump in. But my experience here has been very nurturing.

Why OJ/OC? Why didn't you just quit your job and enroll full-time?

I can't afford to. OJ/OC gave me the opportunity to do this. And even though it's incredibly hard, I can do it. I have both financial and personal responsibilities that demand that I work for a living. Becoming a full-time student—or taking five years part-time in the regular program—is not something I was willing to do. At 50, I see my life in its last third, you know, and I'm not willing to waste a day. If I can do something wonderful that actually saves lives, then so much of my life will have been worth it. ■