

From Chairside to Systemic Change: How Mark Makiling Envisions the Role of Public Health Dentistry

Mark Makiling, DDS, MPH '25, is a practicing dentist who was drawn to public health for the opportunity to bridge clinical practice with advocacy for accessible oral healthcare. His story underscores the power of targeted scholarships, mentorship, and interdisciplinary collaboration in shaping leaders who address systemic barriers to care.



A Path to Dentistry Rooted in Compassion

With two parents in nursing who immigrated from the Philippines, the value of caregiving was instilled early in Mark. But he also knew the emotional toll of high-stakes medical environments wasn't for him.

“My mom worked in a pediatric ICU, and the stories she shared about sick children stayed with me. I couldn't handle the idea that a decision I made might be life or death. Dentistry felt like the perfect fit: deeply impactful without the weight of a patient's mortality.”

Inspired by an uncle and a local dentist, Mark pursued dentistry with a focus on patient-centered care. Soon after graduating NYU College of Dentistry, he realized private practice brought its own kind of pressures: metrics, upselling, and production quotas.

“I hated feeling like a salesman. I didn't want to push unnecessary procedures, I wanted to work stepwise, ethically, based on what the patient actually needed.”

A New Lens at Care for the Homeless

The turning point came when his wife, a faculty member at NYU College of Dentistry, connected him to Care for the Homeless, a nonprofit offering dental services in shelters and soup kitchens.

“Finally, I could practice dentistry without worrying about commission and profits, but rather what patients needed. These patients had nowhere else to go and years of neglected oral health. I did everything I could to save their teeth with the limited tools I had.”

Even in that mission-driven environment, Mark encountered systemic challenges. Appointment times were often too short for complex procedures, supplies were limited, and billing systems weren't designed for dental workflows.

“Leadership did their best to support our work, but without clinical dentists at the decision-making level, there were gaps in understanding”

Through these experiences, Mark recognized a need to build stronger connections between frontline clinical realities and organizational decision-making.

“If I wanted to advocate for the kind of care patients truly need, I had to understand the world of grants, policy, and systems.”

Finding a Bridge: The Apa Scholarship

Mark applied to the Dr. Michael Apa Scholarship Fund in Oral Population Health at CUNY SPH – a full tuition MPH program for oral health professionals in the Tri-state area. The program deepened his understanding of health equity, policy, and ignited an interest in research.

“It was validating to be in a space where people were talking about structural inequities, not just symptoms. I wasn’t the only one asking these questions.”

As a student, Mark co-led multiple focus groups, contributed to publications, and designed a course reviewing critical oral health literature. Mark also played a pivotal role in strengthening the Apa Scholars program by recruiting future cohorts, tapping into his network of dentists, hygienists, and dental students to raise awareness about the opportunity.

“There are so many oral health professionals who care about public health, but they don’t have the time or resources to go back to school especially not full-time. The Apa Scholarship makes it possible.”

Thanks to his outreach, the program gained visibility across hygiene schools and academic dental networks in New York. Mark sees this growing community as essential:

“Most dentists aren’t trained to think at the systems level. But the more we gather in these spaces, the more we can change the field.”

In fall 2025, Mark will also teach Epidemiology of Oral Health to the current cohort Apa scholars.

“I didn’t enter the MPH thinking I’d become a researcher. But now I’m seriously considering a PhD.”

Launched in 2021 by visionary philanthropist and aesthetic dentist Dr. Michael Apa, the **Apa Scholarship Fund in Oral Population Health** established a new area of public health study at CUNY SPH exploring the intersection of oral health and public health. In Fall 2024, the scholarship welcomed its second cohort of 10 Apa Scholars, including Dr. Makiling.

To learn more about the Apa Scholarship and other CUNY SPH Foundation programs, visit foundation.sph.cuny.edu.

Looking Ahead: System-Level Advocacy

Today, Mark balances private practice with teaching and ongoing advocacy. He’s fortunate to have found a dental office that aligns with his patient-centered approach, but he remains focused on bigger change.

“My long-term goal is to help reform dental insurance and expand access to modern care—like implants especially for low-income patients. We have the technology. We just haven’t made it accessible.”

He’s also excited by the idea of growing oral health pipeline programs and integrating public health curricula into clinical training.

“I want to build a future where dentists are trained not just to treat—but to understand, educate, and advocate.”



Mark’s advice for fellow clinicians considering public health?

“Don’t just treat the cavity. Ask why it’s there. Public health gives you the tools to understand a patient’s story and change the system that shapes it.”

Mark’s journey as an Apa Scholar captures what the program was designed to do: support professionals already making a difference and help them lead change on a bigger scale.