Hidden down and around the long corridors of the Central Educational Center building in Newnan – otherwise known as the CEC – is the West Georgia Technical College Dental Assisting wing.

Meander past a few classrooms and labs and you will find a room with several chairs for dental patients and dentists. Basically, it appears to be a dental lab.

But this is no ordinary lab.

While the lab does offer hands-on instruction to a wide variety of students, from dual-enrolled high school students to young adults who are attending West Georgia Tech, it serves a much higher purpose.

It is home to the Coweta Samaritan Clinic’s Dental program, which offers free dental care to those who can’t afford it and who meet certain eligibility requirements. The dental care is provided by area dentists who are volunteering their time – with the help of students from the West Georgia Technical College Dental Assisting Program.

West Georgia Tech Dental Assisting students get hands-on experience in the field, and at the same time give back to their local community in an impactful way.

Mark Whitlock, CEO of Central Educational Center, said that it took the collective efforts of several entities within the community to come together and make this happen.

“Along with the Coweta Samaritan Clinic, West Georgia Technical College and its Dental Assisting program, and the Coweta County School System, the CEC has worked to provide a location for the clinic itself, the equipment, and the opportunity for dentists and dental assistants to provide services to patients. It has worked to provide a venue where all of those various partners could get together and collaborate. That is the purpose of the CEC.”

The Coweta Samaritan Clinic (CSC) was created a few years ago, originating from Dr. Kay Crosby’s calling to create a medical home for uninsured and medically underserved
adults in Coweta County. After spending twenty years practicing internal medicine, Dr. Crosby left her private practice in 2008 to bring a free clinic to her hometown of Newnan.

Since then, the clinic has conducted approximately 9,000 patient visits - all free of charge to the patients - in the four years that the clinic has been in operation, according to Coweta Samaritan Clinic’s Executive Director, Lou Graner.

“Virtually all of the clinic’s more than 1,000 patients have dental issues,” Graner said. “The dental clinic is a wonderful example of the power of collaboration. Thanks to the volunteer dentists, CEC and WGTC, clinic patients receive much needed dental care and the WGTC dental assisting students receive valuable experience working alongside dentists who may one day hire them.”

WGTC dental assistant students are just footsteps away from where these volunteer efforts are taking place.

Kimberly Nolan, WGTC Dental Assisting Department Chair, says that the partnership with the Coweta Samaritan Clinic has provided her students much more than hands-on experience with real patients.

“My students’ response to the Samaritan Clinic has been a great one,” Nolan said. “They have wanted to come, they want to volunteer and they enjoy the volunteer work because they get to learn. They get to learn from, and interact with, the dentists. The mix of the adult learners with the high school students is a great one. The high school students get to help the adult learners with the technology and the adult learners are able to help the high school students on a maturity level, and everybody is on the same page.”

Valeria Fajardo was a senior at East Coweta High School, and already graduated from the West Georgia Technical College Dental Assisting program, when she began working with the Coweta Samaritan Dental Clinic.

“I thought it would be a great idea to try the Dental Assisting program at West Georgia Tech and I found out that I loved dentistry, so now I am going to go into Dental Hygiene. I still remember the first day that we volunteered at the Samaritan Clinic. I was so nervous – but it was such a rewarding experience. I got to work with local dentists and I had the opportunity to make connections with them. It was amazing helping people in need,” Fajardo said.

Whitlock said that around 15 local dentists volunteer their time throughout the year. He estimates that approximately 100 uninsured or medically underserved patients have come through the doors of the CEC to be seen by volunteer dentists at the WGTC Dental
Assisting Lab. The number of overall patient visits to the Coweta Samaritan Dental Clinic is approximately 250 since inception, according to Whitlock.

Local resident Diane Starkey was one of them. Her story is similar to that of many others who have come through those same doors.

“It is a service (dental work) that I had not received in a long time,” Starkey said. “I was laid off from my job and didn’t have any insurance at all – medical or dental. They fixed a tooth that I was having a toothache with and I couldn’t get anybody to help me with. I tried saving money to pay for it.

“I even sold some thing things in my house, trying to get enough money to go. I just couldn’t do it. They took me in, and it’s just been amazing. I don’t know where I would be without them,” Starkey said, her voice trailing off as she broke into tears.

West Georgia Technical College has made it a top priority to work with community and statewide stakeholders to collaborate and generate ready-to-hire skilled workers in areas of need as directed by business and industry.

Since Steve G. Daniel became President of West Georgia Tech in July of last year, workforce development and training has been a hallmark of his leadership.

Daniel said that collaborative efforts such as the one between the Coweta Samaritan Clinic, the Central Educational Center and the West Georgia Technical College Dental Assisting Program, are paramount in WGTC’s efforts to create a better learning environment for tomorrow’s workforce.

“The fact that our students and our dual-enrolled students have an opportunity to get hands-on experience and work with local dentists as part of the program – that makes our program so strong,” Daniel said. “But I’m even more proud of the fact that we could help provide a location for this great effort, and give our students a place where they can give back to the local community and make a difference. That’s what West Georgia Tech is all about.”

Dr. Nancy M. Carson is one of the volunteer dentists at the Coweta Samaritan Clinic. She said that the dentists also benefit from the partnership with CEC and West Georgia Tech.

“Not only are we helping the people who can’t afford dentistry, helping to get them to a healthy state, a healthy smile, but we are working with young people in the program who are learning to be dental assistants. So we get to work with them and they are so well trained from the system here and the CEC and West Georgia Tech. They get practical experience working with real patients and in a fairly relaxed atmosphere.”
The hands-on experience that comes with working with dentists and patients is, without question, beneficial to the students in the WGTC Dental Assisting program.

But it’s the fact that they are, at the same time, giving back to the community by helping someone in need, that is the biggest benefit to the students.

Listen to Valeria Fajardo, the East Coweta High School dual-enrollee who was quoted earlier in the story.

“I had one patient who, the whole time, she held my hand. And I felt so – I just felt like I was doing a lot for her. And how that makes me feel, personally – I just can’t put it into words.”

The Coweta Samaritan Clinic, Central Educational Center and West Georgia Tech have created a unique, collaborative effort that is truly making a difference.

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For more information on the Coweta Samaritan Clinic, visit www.CowetaSamaritanClinic.org.

For more information on the Central Educational Center, visit www.CentralEducationCenter.net.

For more information on the Dental Assisting program at West Georgia Technical College, visit www.westgatech.edu/academics/DentalAssisting.

West Georgia Technical College, with campuses in Carroll, Coweta, Douglas, Haralson and Troup counties and class sites in Heard and Meriwether counties offers over 120 associate degree, diploma and technical certificate programs of study. A unit of the Technical College System of Georgia, West Georgia Tech is the fourth largest of the state’s 22 technical colleges.