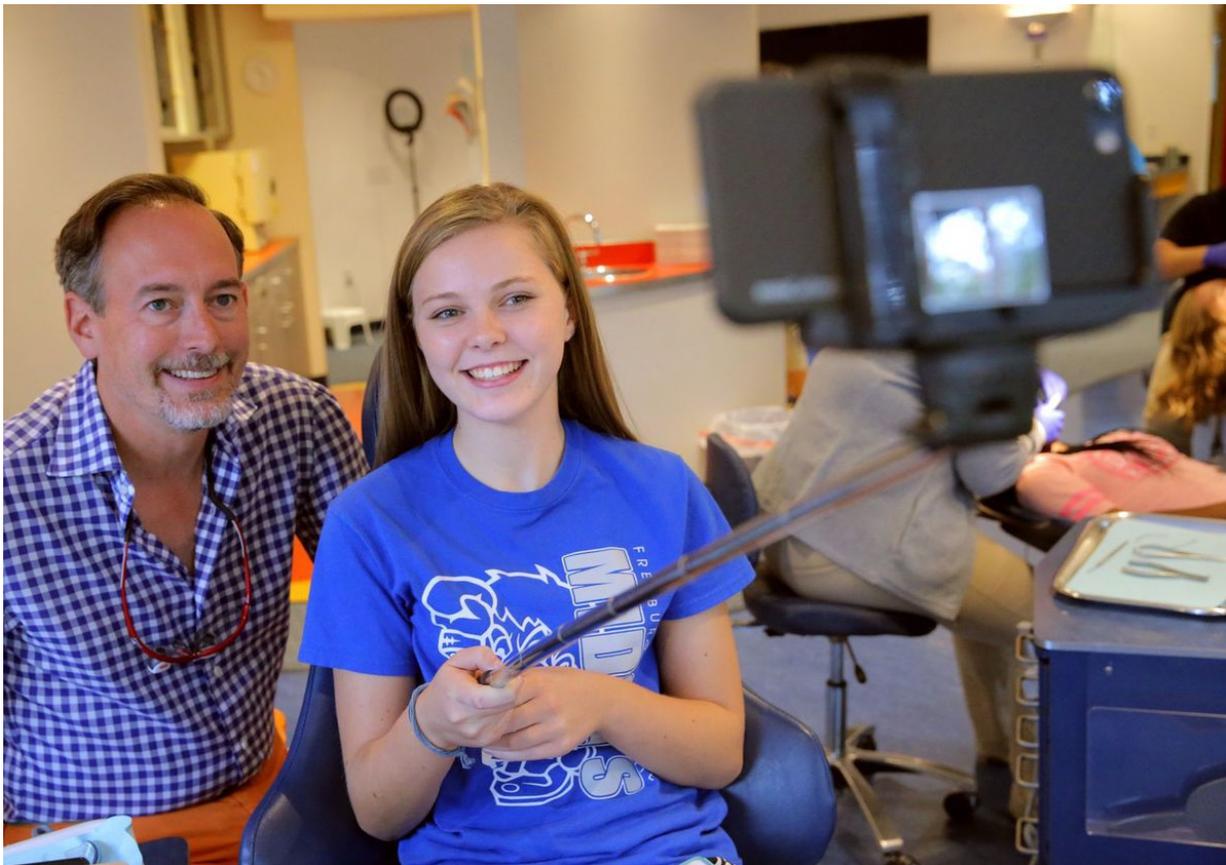


HEALTH

http://www.stltoday.com/lifestyles/health-med-fit/health/he-helps-bring-smiles-to-st-louis-area-kids-whose/article_85e6132c-f857-5143-be42-2642d7f96714.html

He helps bring smiles to St. Louis-area kids whose families can't afford orthodontics

By Michele Munz St. Louis Post-Dispatch Sep 27, 2017



Mollie Wolf, 15, of Freeburg, Ill., takes a selfie with orthodontist Dr. Randall Markarian after getting her braces taken off at Markarian Orthodontics in Swansea, Ill. on Wednesday, Sept. 13, 2017. Markarian customarily takes selfies for their office Facebook page whenever a patient gets braces put on or taken off. Markarian Orthodontics partners with Smiles Change Lives, a nonprofit that helps with the cost of braces for qualifying families. Wolf received her braces through the Smiles Change Lives program. Photo by Cristina M. Fletes, cfletes@post-dispatch.com

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SWANSEA • They drove more than an hour to get to Markarian Orthodontics for their appointments one recent morning in a bustling Metro East office.

A girl, 15, got her braces off before her homecoming. A sixth-grader with a severe overbite couldn't hold back his smile over his new braces. A 12-year-old girl getting a retainer said her newfound confidence helped her win a major award at school.



Smiles Change Lives helps make braces more affordable to those who qualify

St. Louis Post-Dispatch



Autoplay: On | Off

Their braces would have been out of reach financially for their families, but orthodontists such as Dr. Randall Markarian volunteer their time and equipment so children can have a smile they are proud of.

The need, however, far outweighs the number of volunteers.

Markarian agreed to take all 11 children on a waiting list for braces in the St. Louis area — where wait times reached as long as a year.

The orthodontist has donated his services for more than 10 years through the Smiles Change Lives program, which partners with 750 orthodontists nationwide to get care for kids who need it.

“He’s by far one of our best providers in the country,” said Alexis Barclay, director of provider services for Smiles Change Lives. “Our providers take three to four kids a year, on average. Every single year, Dr. Markarian takes about 20. He continues to go above and beyond.”

Sara Tanner said the program has been a “godsend” for her family, who lives an hour away near Pinckneyville, Ill. Tanner stays home to care for their four children, and her husband is a truck driver.

Her 13-year-old daughter got her braces off at Markarian’s office recently. Only one day before that, her 11-year-old son, Jonah, got his on. He has been self-conscious of his overbite and won’t smile for pictures, Tanner said.

“My teeth are just so bad,” Jonah said. “They are messed up.”

He was so happy after getting his braces that he couldn’t stop smiling. “I already feel better,” he said.

They need a boost

Braces cost about \$5,000, putting them out of reach for many families. Orthodontic care is considered cosmetic by insurance companies, which provide little assistance. Only the most severe medical cases get covered.

Smiles Change Lives started as the Virginia Brown Community Orthodontic Partnership in 1997 in the Kansas City area, where orthodontics residents at the University of Missouri – Kansas City donate services.

Less than a decade later, the organization began to grow nationwide, with the St. Louis area as one the first expansion sites. Markarian, who also has an office in O’Fallon, Ill., was the first to sign on and help recruit other doctors.

“This seemed like a great way to make sure kids who needed treatment, get it,” said Markarian, 50, of University City.

To qualify for assistance, a patient must be between the ages of 7 and 21, maintain good oral hygiene, have a moderate to severe need for braces and meet financial guidelines (An example: For a family of four, household income must be below \$61,500).

Applicants must submit an essay about why they want braces and, when accepted, pay \$650 to Smiles Change Lives, which screens applications, assigns patients and recruits doctors.

“My favorite thing is the pure gratitude that you get from the families,” Markarian said. “My Smiles Change Lives patients don’t miss their appointments. They do an exceptional job at taking care of their braces.”

Markarian said he gets paid in handmade coffee mugs, freshly baked cupcakes, tears from happy parents and the looks his patients give when they see their new straight teeth.

“I get to watch kids blossom and come out of their shell and develop into these confident, secure kids,” he said. “They have a need for orthodontic treatment based on what is going on in their mouth, and they have a need for treatment because of what is going on in their head. They need a boost.”

In a sign of her joy and confidence, Mollie Wolf, 15, of Freeburg, took a selfie with her smartphone as soon as she got her braces off. She sent it to two of her friends and a “guy I’ve been talking to” with the message, “Look at my teeth!”

Mollie had needed braces because her two front teeth turned in, and her canine teeth were high in her gums. Her mom runs an in-home day care, and her dad’s business was struggling.

Her new smile came just in time for her school’s homecoming football game and dance. “We take a lot of pictures,” she said, “so I’m super excited I won’t have my braces on my teeth. I won’t have crooked teeth.”

‘The impact we would have’

In the St. Louis area, 14 orthodontists participate in the Smiles Change Lives program, Barclay said.

Markarian wants that to change. He issued a challenge to the approximately 75 orthodontists who work within a 35-mile radius of St. Louis.

“If every orthodontist committed to care for one kid in need each year, that would be tremendous,” he said. “The impact we would have on these kids would be incredible.”

Kenedi Jenkins, 12, said she used to feel uncomfortable speaking in front of others because of the gap between her front teeth. She was afraid to smile.

When Kenedi was back at Markarian’s office for a new retainer four months after getting her braces off in May, the seventh-grader at Holman Middle School in Bridgeton revealed she had just been chosen as her class “Super Student.”

Teachers choose the student based on grades, behavior and effort. A teacher told Kenedi that one reason she chose her was because she always walks in the room with a smile.

“I can smile way better,” Kenedi said. “I’m so glad my teeth are perfect and straight.”

Michele Munz

Michele Munz is a health reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.