

Orthodontist builds self-esteem with a smile

01:32 AM CST on Monday, January 3, 2005

By MARISSA ALANIS / The Dallas Morning News



JUAN GARCIA/DMN

McKinney orthodontist Jennifer Stroud Buchanan works on the teeth of Peter Ajang, 23, in her office. Mr. Ajang is one of the 'Lost Boys of Sudan' to whom Dr. Buchanan has been providing orthodontic service.

Dr. Jennifer Stroud Buchanan views her orthodontic work as more than just adjusting the bites of her patients.

"The good thing about orthodontics is you get to help build the self-esteem of your patients," she said.

Her desire to make people feel better about themselves and their smiles is evident in the work she has done for others, such as three Sudanese immigrants who are part of a group that came to the Dallas area a few years ago.

The immigrants escaped a civil war and came to the United States as part of a government resettlement program. They are known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan," and some of them moved to McKinney.

She said the three are missing their lower teeth after they were extracted without anesthesia in their homeland. The extractions represent a sign of manhood in their culture; however, their bites are now altered and they have problems chewing.

"A lot of them were embarrassed about their smiles and wanted to smile," she said.

Now, two of them are wearing braces, and plans for the third to receive them are under way.

"It's been very easy," she said of their treatment. "They haven't had any problems. They never complain."

Dr. Buchanan also helps boost the self-esteem of McKinney students through a scholarship program. She works with school nurses who nominate students with self-esteem issues and financial challenges that prevent them from getting orthodontic treatment.

Since she started the program six years ago, Dr. Buchanan has given free orthodontic treatment to about 35 students.

"You just get so much out of it because you know you're helping someone and making them happy," she said. "They're just the best patients. It brings me to tears."

Dr. Buchanan said she would give out more scholarships – perhaps to every McKinney student who graduates – if she won the lottery. In this case, the scholarships would be for college education. Dr. Buchanan strongly advocates higher education.

"That's the best gift you can give to somebody is education," she said. "Then they can better the world with it. Your education is something that can't be taken away from you."

She sits on the board of directors for the McKinney Education Foundation. She also is a member and former president of the Stonebridge Ladies Association, former board member of the McKinney Chamber of Commerce and member of the McKinney Rotary Club.

Dr. Buchanan started her McKinney orthodontic practice in 1996. Through her practice, she helps the local community by having a holiday party each year that benefits the North Collin County Habitat for Humanity. More than \$35,000 has been raised to date through the party.

She said she enjoys her career because it's challenging and is a natural fit for her because she loves people. She also gets to know her patients well because of the length of their treatments.

"That's one of the things I really like about it is that you get to establish close relationships," she said.

E-mail malanis@dallasnews.com