

Free braces? Smile for a Lifetime can help



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Thirteen-year-old Eby Davis-Calvo is getting braces, and she couldn't be happier.

Speaking as the mother of three, I can only marvel at how unusual this is. My children wore braces to avert all manner of calamities in their mouths, but I can't say any of them smiled like Eby in the orthodontist's chair.

At the time, I wasn't smiling either.



Eby Davis-Calvo undergoes the process of having braces installed by dental assistant Cindy Cuoto at Gire Orthodontics in La Habra.

ARMANDO BROWN, FOR THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Braces were just one more pothole that jolted my economic chassis. The orthodontist spoke of "phases" the way a land developer would point toward an empty hilltop. We had extended payment plans stretching far into the horizon.

Orthodontia is one of those things parents want to do for our children, but it straddles the boundary between luxury and necessity. Braces straighten your teeth and align your bite, but they also straighten the posture of your self-esteem.

A new nonprofit in Orange County, Smile for a Lifetime, recognizes the value of both.

Eby applied for and is receiving an orthodontic scholarship for her teeth. No wonder her mother is also smiling.

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Marlo Klein, president of the Smile for a Lifetime chapter in Orange County, never wore braces – but she is emphatic about their importance.

"Braces are life-changing."

Luxury or necessity, I ask? After all, many people today are unable to afford the home they used to live in.

Both, she answers.

"Braces are a luxury for a lot of people ... It's the last thing they think about and the first thing to go."

Braces create a beautiful smile, Klein explains, which leads to self-confidence and that self-confidence can change your life.

It's like buying a time-share. You pay for a vacation, but you're hoping the purchase will include great memories.

This local chapter of the national organization helps four to six children per year. The scholarship worth about \$6,000 includes the initial X-rays, braces and all the doctor visits.

Klein mentions the boy who received braces and began speaking up in class and earning better grades.

"Braces can change your outlook."

Turns out Ormco Corp., based in Orange for 50 years, makes many braces possible. It designs and manufactures the brackets and wires, those little pieces that come together in a mouth.

In Eby's case the braces are assembled on models in a tray, waiting to be bonded to her teeth.

Ormco became national sponsor of Smile for a Lifetime in 2010 and donates its products to orthodontists in the program. In fact, Eby can see her future smile because Ormco's Insignia software offers a 3-D digital view of her teeth before and as they rotate into position after. Who knew?

When Ormco realized there was no chapter in Orange County, it helped start one. Today there are 105 national chapters, and the organization is starting another in the San Clemente area.

They are seeking children to help and orthodontists to help them.

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Robert Gire, of Gire Orthodontics in La Habra, is donating his time to treat Eby until her braces come off in a year or two.

He has committed to treat one patient per quarter for Smile for a Lifetime.

"We know there is a definite need," says Gire, who also serves on the advisory board for Friends of Family Health Center in La Habra.

"Nobody has ever died from crooked teeth ... but your smile is the first thing people notice."

As a child, Gire needed braces but his parents couldn't afford them. He got them himself while he was a student at USC School of Dentistry.

"Some of these kids, we can't get them to smile and show their teeth ... At the end, we can't get them to stop smiling."

It's interesting to note that while his practice was 80 percent children when he started five years ago, today they are only 60 percent. Braces aren't just for adolescents any more.

Eby, a seventh-grader from Anaheim, has set her sights on a career in musical theater. This fan of "Wicked" knows braces will only help.

"I want to stand on stage with a beautiful, straight smile."

Her mother, Sheryl Calvo, is a single mother of two who would love braces for herself, but can't afford them.

"I don't smile with my teeth."

As mothers do, she wants to take care of her children first.

"Eby looks forward to a career. I've lived 30 years with my teeth like this ... I wouldn't be able to do this any other way."

In order to win her scholarship, Eby gathered letters of recommendation and answered essay questions. The Smile for a Lifetime board reviews applications once a quarter.

Eby explained what braces would mean to her:

"I would love to have straight teeth so I am not embarrassed by my smile ... If I had braces ... I would smile forever – even in my sleep."

Applicants with financial need must be 11 to 18 years old, with all of their permanent teeth, and demonstrate good dental hygiene.

A big concern is whether a patient would cooperate, or be compliant, with the treatment.

"Compliance is always an issue," admits Gire, who knows that some children simply won't eat the right foods, brush their teeth or wear their retainer.

"Some of them, though, really want the braces. They're willing to make a commitment."

It's ironic that what means so little to some can be so important to others.

For information on Smile for a Lifetime visit: www.s4l.org.

Contact the writer at 949 645 1872