

## Giving thanks: New smile from Naples dental center means new life

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Wednesday, November 27, 2013

In 20 years, Andrew Whitehurst has overcome more adversity than most of us will face in a lifetime. Complications at Andrew's birth later were diagnosed as cerebral palsy, epilepsy and autism. Doctors told his mother, Melissa, her son never would walk or talk.

He does both. He also does laundry, and for Andrew, a trip to the local laundromat is like a day at Disney World. His simple joy for life always evokes a smile from his mom.

But Andrew's own smile was sorely deteriorating to a point that no one fully understood, until a visit to the Naples Children & Education Foundation Pediatric Dental Center in May. It was a visit that would change his life.

For most families, an annual trip to the dentist is routine, compulsory and sometimes anxiety-ridden, but for Melissa and Andrew, of Lakeland, it was a nightmare.

"Over the years, it has been extremely difficult to obtain proper dental care for Andy," she said. "Exams made him a nervous wreck. He tends to be very fearful and loud, so they were not able to complete a thorough exam."

Even basic treatment, such as cleanings, required anesthesia, for which the family's medical and dental insurance companies refused to pay. Despite attempts of several pediatric dental agencies to examine Andrew without anesthesia, the extent of his dental issues remained unknown.

"I knew Andy hated to have his teeth brushed," Melissa said. "But I had no idea how serious his dental issues were."

Last year, Andrew was referred by his family dentist to the new NCEF Pediatric Dental Center on the East Naples campus of Edison State College. The center is one of very few in the state with the resources to provide specialized dental care for children such as Andrew.

Staffed by the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida and pediatric dental residents from the University of Florida College of Dentistry, this 20,000 square foot, state-of-the-art facility offers routine and specialty services for underserved young people up to age 21.

Andrew was seen by Dr. Lauren Governale, clinical director of the NCEF Pediatric Dental Center, who recommended further treatment under anesthesia.

“Andrew is one of hundreds of patients at the center who lack the ability to cooperate for complex dental care in the clinic environment,” Governale said. “Thanks to NCEF, the center has been provided the tools needed to help these families.”

She added the center also works in partnership with Lee Memorial Health System, which allows access to its operating room and anesthesia team to provide special-needs patients with comfortable care under general anesthesia.

Despite these resources, the need far outweighs availability. Andrew remained on a waiting list for more than a year.

When his turn did come, it entailed a three-hour surgery, during which Governale addressed years of serious dental issues. They had to remove one tooth and restore 20 more in critical need of care.

As the hours stretched on, Melissa said she was relieved that her son was comfortable and tolerated the procedures well. He was able to return home the same day.

“We were extremely pleased with the care provided to Andy, as well as the concern and kindness extended to our entire family,” Melissa said.

But it wasn't until that evening and the days that followed that Melissa would realize the extent of her son's previous debilitating pain.

In a heartfelt letter to Governale, Melissa shared her moment of realization: “Although Andrew has extremely limited verbal communication, you cannot imagine how thrilled I was that night when he looked deep into my eyes and said clearly, ‘Teeth no hurt.’ ”

Since his dental surgery, Andrew's medications have been reduced by an amazing 90 percent, astounding his physicians. Those included drugs to address behavior, which Melissa now believes was greatly affected by years of constant dental pain.

Freedom from pain also has changed Andrew's social life. Formerly a homebody, he now loves going places, especially the MOSI Science Center in Tampa. He is an avid football fan and proudly serves as the “official towel washer” for the Geneva Classical Academy Knights, his brothers' football team.

“It has been a delight getting to know the new Andrew — our family, friends and physicians are overwhelmed with the progress he has made since May,” Melissa wrote to Governale.

“I am so thankful, and sincerely wish every child with special needs could be seen in your wonderful dental clinic.”



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