

Behind the Smile

How bioesthetic dentistry helped one competitive girl get the smile she deserved.

By KRISTY ALPERT

I BLAME IT ALL ON MY COMPETITIVE nature. My dentist thinks otherwise. But I know how it began. It's not that I needed to be the best. I just needed to win.

I was 10 years old at the time of my "accident." My dad and I made one of our weekly trips to the park down the street. It was just like any other day. But that day I challenged him to a race on a set of blue metal steps. I jumped higher and ran faster at each step until I was ahead of my dad—then bam! I lost my footing and fell face first onto the metal step in front of me. My mouth broke my fall, leaving four of my front teeth chipped.

My dentist suggested composite bonding to replace the chipped segments in my teeth, but the thought of having fake teeth in my mouth—and never being able to bite into an apple again—freaked me out, so I declined. I would just have to live with my not-so-perfect smile, which I did for another 10 years. Sure, I had my moments in middle school when I was ashamed to smile, but I quickly overcame my pride and smiled my way through high school. Nobody seemed to notice, and outside of my regular dentist appointments, I never really gave it much thought.

That is, until I started getting headaches all the time after laughing or smiling too much. They weren't debilitating headaches, but they were just annoying enough to make it slightly painful and uncomfortable to smile. Hanging out

with my friends suddenly meant popping two or three Aleve in advance to "pre-treat" my symptoms. If I read that something caused headaches—caffeine, sugar—I cut it out of my diet, because I didn't want to risk it. I even believed the headaches were caused by not drinking enough water. So not only was I unable to smile as much with my friends, but I was also running to the bathroom every 30 minutes.

But smiling too much wasn't the only culprit. I woke every morning with a groggy feeling and a dull headache—it felt like I was walking around with a heavy weight on my shoulders—and I noticed my night guard was so worn through there were holes in the plastic. Two night guards later, I realized that I had been grinding my teeth so much that my teeth had developed a slight ridge in the middle.

Turns out my accident, the headaches, and the teeth grinding were unrelated; the only thing they had in common was that they made my smile "unappealing." But the aesthetics of it all weren't what concerned my good friend and dentist, Hal Stewart, D.D.S., in Flower Mound. At my next routine dental cleaning, Dr. Stewart and I were catching up on life and I happened to mention the frequent headaches. Lucky for me, Dr. Stewart is one of about 155 dentists in America who practice bioesthetic dentistry, which focuses on the human chewing system

in its natural form and function.

Thanks to his background in bioesthetics, he determined I was suffering from malocclusion (a misaligned bite) because of the uneven wear of my teeth, so he was not surprised when I mentioned my symptoms. "In a healthy and stable bite, teeth do not wear, no matter how old," Stewart told me. He said my facial muscle tension didn't surprise him at all, because these symptoms pretty much go hand-in-hand with what he saw in my mouth: tooth wear.

He sat me down and explained a process that would go to the root of my symptoms—the headaches and tooth wear—and change my life forever. He was confident that bioesthetic dentistry would eliminate my problems and renew my smile. He told me that bioesthetic dentistry is based upon three fundamental principles: proper joint form (place the joint where it needs to be regardless of where the teeth place it), proper tooth form (meaning worn teeth would need to be repaired), and proper bite between the upper and lower teeth at the new and stable joint position. He believed if we satisfied these three principles, I would look—and, more important, feel—great.

At first I was hesitant to jump into the program because I'd been living with my unstable jaw and less-than-perfect teeth for so long—what was another 20 years? But Dr. Stewart informed me that just as my symptoms had gotten worse

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LOVE BITE: With help from bioesthetic dentistry, Kristy Alpert now has a smile she adores.

over time, they would only become more severe with age, resulting in broken teeth, root canals, crowns, and lost teeth. I looked into other options, including crowns and jaw surgery, but the first was not a permanent fix, and the latter would be painful and required going under the knife. Through many long talks, Dr. Stewart told me that these other methods would not go to the root of my problem. Going the bioesthetic route would not only fix my jaw issues, but it would also be the minimally invasive (read: no surgery!) way to renew my smile.

I knew I was in good hands. I knew how passionate Dr. Stewart was about this form of dentistry. I also knew that he would take the time to walk me through the process. "I have a very low-volume practice by design," Stewart said. "I really like to get to know my patients and develop a trusting and personal relationship with them. On average I see about four patients a day." And so we began the treatment.

The first step was creating a maxillary anterior guided orthodic (MAGO) for me that would help open my jaw so that my joint could stabilize. It was basically a hard, plastic mouth guard that I wore full time for two months while going to Dr. Stewart's once a week for

adjustments. I can't say this was my most attractive time of life. While most people go through their awkward stages when they're younger, I had mine in college. I did learn plenty about myself during those two months; I realized I was an extremely prideful person.

After I finished my MAGO therapy, Dr. Stewart built up my worn teeth with a tooth-colored bonding material, to restore the proper form of my teeth and bite. According to Dr. Stewart, the MAGO helped achieve the first principle of bioesthetics, a stable joint. Then, thanks to composite bonding, he built up my teeth to achieve the next two principles: proper tooth form and proper bite.

"We restored your bite with extremely conservative (no teeth were ground down) and beautiful dental restorations," he said. "The result was perfectly formed teeth, a perfect bite, and a stable joint. This resulted in a very relaxed facial

appearance and an absolutely beautiful smile. We were able to do this without having to grind down or take away any of the natural tooth structure. That is the beauty of bioesthetic dentistry—it allows many restorative options because it addresses the whole bite system and stabilizes it."

The results, in my opinion, were headache-free moments with friends, a smile to be proud of, and restored confidence. Not to mention that I could smile and laugh on my wedding day without headaches—and the pictures looked great! True, I can't bite into an apple without first slicing it up, but other than that, I have no more issues with the bonding than I would with my normal teeth. The only downside is that now instead of having dreams of showing up to work naked, I have dreams of my teeth falling out.

Dr. Stewart assures me the latter won't happen. **D**

