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# what's in a smile?

## A WHOLE LOT

*Just Ask Dr. Robert Sheffield*

ORTHODONTIC FOUNDATION - SHARING SMILES - MARKS ITS 100<sup>TH</sup> RECIPIENT

**a**s a kid, Rob Sheffield was fixated on his calling, laser beam focus, you can say. At age six, he wrote the following words on a scrapbook to his mom, "I want to be a dentist." Picture Hermey from "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" who, unlike his fellow elves, disliked making toys and wished to be a dentist instead.

It wasn't just talk to make Mom happy. Fast-forward decades later, true to his word, Dr. Robert Sheffield's dentistry profession spans 23 years, and his dedication is responsible for generating thousands of smiles throughout Contra Costa County.

"While most six-year-olds at that time marveled the work of firefighters or policemen, I had my mind set on being a dentist. Yeah, I guess I wasn't the coolest kid on the block," comments Sheffield. "I never really entertained another profession, and the older I got, the more I was fascinated with dentistry."

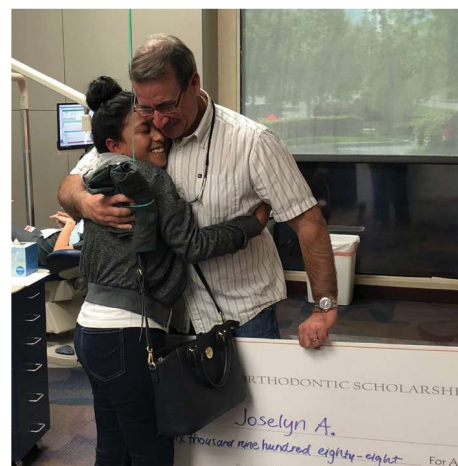
He certainly had the support at home and in his community to fine-tune his calling. His grandparents and mom were long-time Antioch educators, so he didn't steer far from his studies. And there were plenty of dental practitioners that didn't mind taking him under their wings. As he got older, he partnered and received hands-on experience from two Bay Area dentists.

"Two of my mentors were Dr. Jeffery and Dr. Lippencott. They truly were skilled in their craft and instilled how important dentists are to a community."

His perseverance paid off and he soon graduated from UCLA's School of Dentistry specializing in orthodontics and pediatrics. After 12 years of school in southern California, Sheffield and his wife Cristie decided to return to their northern California roots. It wasn't long before he established practices in Antioch and Brentwood. He has served thousands of clients by providing adolescent and adult treatment, to custom braces.

"My wife and I both grew up in the Bay Area and were pleased when, ultimately, being able to start my career





**“FOR NEARLY A DECADE, DR. SHEFFIELD HAS AWARDED 99 ORTHODONTIC SCHOLARSHIPS VALUED AT A WHOPPING \$600,000.”**

in East County was also quite meaningful as my mother was raised in Antioch,” comments Sheffield.

To this day, Sheffield believes that dentistry, and orthodontics in particular, is a profession where he can make a significant difference in people’s lives.

“It might sound corny, but a smile says a lot about a person; an amazing smile goes a long way. It radiates warmth, allows people to feel at ease, brings confidence, and professionalism; it’s practically the first thing people see, it’s the basis of falling in love, and so much more. That’s why I focused my talents at being an expert in one area—a person’s teeth are a major factor when people smile,” he says.

**PAY IT FORWARD – ENTER SHARING SMILES**

In 2010, Sheffield attended a conference where he heard a colleague promote a foundation that provides orthodontic scholarships to the underserved. After a few phone calls, he knew he found the perfect opportunity to give back to local residents.

A year later, Sheffield established a local chapter of the foundation. He partnered with area dental professionals, community advisors, and advocates to

provide orthodontic scholarships for kids. The goal is to award 12 scholarships yearly. Applicants must complete a short essay, submit school transcripts, provide letters of recommendation, and demonstrate financial need.

During the last decade, Dr. Sheffield has awarded 99 orthodontic scholarships valued at a whopping \$600,000.

In 2019, Dr. Sheffield established his own non-profit foundation called Sharing Smiles. The mission and operating procedure are similar, but his foundation gives him more control to allow recipients to pay nothing for the treatment.

“I wanted free orthodontic treatment to be free,” explains Sheffield. “Whenever, I told people about the foundation they would say, ‘What’s the catch?’ I would tell them there is no catch. I’m giving back.”

Wendy Herman is part of the ten-member board of Sharing Smiles. The board is composed of a cross-section of community representatives that include law enforcement, teachers, religious leaders, and business delegates. She is also a retired dentist who volunteers her time tutoring kids at the Village Community Resource Center in Brentwood. Twice a

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year, the board reviews stacks of scholarship applications from all over East Contra Costa County.

All orthodontic work is performed by Dr. Sheffield and his team in his offices in Antioch and Brentwood. He also partners with an army of local dentists who volunteer their time to perform general cleanings, x-rays, and fillings to recipients.

Herman is proud to report Sharing Smiles will be awarding its 100th scholarship recipient this fall. “That’s just amazing. To reach out to so many folks who otherwise wouldn’t have the financial means to get orthodontic work,” she says.

She has seen firsthand how the end results of the dental procedure changes a youngster’s view of life. “The orthodontic treatment varies from patient to patient, but it’s amazing to see a kid’s self-esteem and positive outlook just skyrocket. That makes it all worthwhile and pays dividends for the kids down the road.”

A boost to self-esteem certainly went a long way for Sharing Smiles recipient, 14-year-old, and soon-to-be high school student, Katie Gregory. She was in need of braces, so her mom, Lisa, began to research dental businesses that might offer low-cost orthodontic work. Lisa had dental coverage, but the out-of-pocket cost of \$5,000 to as much as \$8,000 was far from her reach. They got news of Sharing Smiles and applied.

The application process was seamless. They gathered letters of recommendation from Katie’s teacher, a mentor, and others that knew her well. In the required essay they talked about the struggles they faced as a family with history of domestic violence, mental illness,

and substance abuse, all of which impacted the family financially and emotionally.

“Everything was covered. There were no out-of-pocket expenses that we had to pay,” recalls Lisa. Each orthodontic case varies, but the treatment can run for up to two years. Cleanings and x-rays are performed by volunteer dentists in the area.

“Having no out-of-pocket expense is a huge relief as I am a single parent, working for a non-profit and struggling to make ends meet in a very expensive Bay Area,” says Lisa.

Nikita Jegers of Antioch was a 2014 Sharing Smiles recipient. Getting braces completely changed Nikita’s outlook. “I was a very introverted teenager. The teenage years are very hard on a kid,” Nikita remembers. “I rarely smiled because my teeth were bad, shifted badly. I didn’t have many friends and I was afraid of being judged when I smiled. I know it sounds silly being that concerned about looks but that was a big deal when I was in high school.”

He stumbled across a flyer at school that announced an orthodontic scholarship from Dr. Sheffield. He took the flyer home and his parents encouraged him to apply.

Sharing Smiles stresses the importance of service to the community. All recipients are encouraged to commit to volunteerism either at school or in their community.

Board member and pastor at St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Antioch, Father Robert Rien often preaches about the value of volunteerism. “We encourage ‘paying it forward’ not because we have to but because we want to, in gratitude for all that has been given to us,” he says. “Perhaps this immeasurable gift from Sharing Smiles will have the potential of motivating recipients for a lifetime of giving to others in ways that could never be imagined.”

Katie took those words to heart. She partnered with the Antioch Library where she will be working on a planning session committee for a new teen center. The honor roll student is heading to Deer Valley High School where she would like to concentrate in astronomy and carry that into college.



The pandemic put everything on hold and sidetracked the removal of Katie’s braces. She had to wait a few extra months until Dr. Sheffield was given the green light to resume full operation. In two months, the braces come off. She is thrilled to see the end result. Her smile will surely be infectious to everyone she meets.

Meanwhile, Nikita Jegers didn’t look back when he found his perfect volunteer niche. He worked as an assistant coach and referee at the California Football Academy in Oakley where he worked with kids in stressing the importance of sportsmanship.

“Sharing Smiles is an amazing opportunity that gave me a new smile. I hope the program continues because it grants people an experience of a lifetime,” comments Nikita.

At 19, Nikita just completed a two-year transfer program at Los Medanos College. He will be attending UC Davis in the fall where he is planning to double major in Chemistry and Pharmaceutical Science. **110°**

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