



# Game Changer

Dr. Tejy Thomas, director of Center City Orthodontics, uses his expertise to change the lives of people throughout the region *by* LEIGH STUART

**According to a survey** by the American Association of Cosmetic Dentistry, 45 percent of people agree that no matter the stage in life, a smile is a person's best feature. This statistic could explain why Tejy Thomas, D.M.D., director of Center City Orthodontics in Philadelphia, stays so busy helping to perfect the smiles of patients of all ages.

In addition to his own packed schedule of orthodontic patients of all ages, Dr. Thomas makes time to work with Smiles Change Lives, a nonprofit organization that offers orthodontic treatment to underprivileged youth throughout the country. Through Smiles Change Lives, Dr. Thomas has spent the past three years providing children, age 16 or younger, with free orthodontic treatment, from start to finish.

Smiles Change Lives is not just the name of an organization but rather an ideal that dentists such as Dr. Thomas take to heart. A smile is more than an aesthetic feature; mis-

aligned teeth can lead to a great deal of functional issues, which can have a huge impact on someone's life.

"My orthodontist changed my life, and was what made me want to be an orthodontist," Dr. Thomas says. "It's important to me to carry that on and make a difference by giving back."

Dr. Thomas cites the example of one recent patient, a 12-year-old boy from Delaware, who wouldn't even smile so the doctor could take a photo for his records. "It took a good 20 minutes to get him to crack a little smile where you could see his teeth," Dr. Thomas says. The patient had severe crowding; teeth needed to be removed, the rest lined up. The boy had difficulty even chewing food. That was two years ago. Today, he stands five inches taller and, after treatment, has become "a different person," Dr. Thomas says. "He can't stop talking. We chat about basketball; he even talks about a girl in high school he has a crush on."

Dr. Thomas says the boy has even written to ask if he can spend Saturdays in the office because he has been inspired to pursue a career in dentistry.

Another patient who was referred to Dr. Thomas by Smiles Change Lives—this one a young lady from the Poconos—experienced similar stress because of her smile. Because of her teeth, the girl was bullied to the point where her mother had to switch her school four times in two years. The girl had underlying skeletal deformities and could not close her mouth. When her parents approached Dr. Thomas, saying he was their last hope, he took the case.

"I'm proud to say so far we've never turned down a Smiles Change Lives patient," the doctor says. "It's really the more complex cases that need treatment."

Now, her case is almost resolved. Since starting her treatment the girl received a Hilary



Clinton scholarship to complete summer studies in California; she is excelling academically; and she is no longer being bullied.

"Clearly, she is doing all the hard work, but I can tell you it all started with her teeth getting fixed," Dr. Thomas says. "Each one of our Smiles Change Lives patients has a story like that. Even from a team perspective, my staff always comes back to tell me how they feel good being involved in something that really makes a difference. I stress these things, but to know everyone around me feels the same way means a lot."

Speaking on behalf of his team at Center City Orthodontics, Dr. Thomas says, "We feel we're lucky to be in a program where we can give back. Philanthropy has been huge for us. We are the leading provider in the Philadelphia area for Smiles Change Lives and that's something we take seriously, giving back to the community."

Dr. Thomas, who earned his D.M.D. from the University of Pennsylvania and remains affiliated with his alma mater as a clinical associate, has been in practice in the Greater Philadelphia Area for 15 years. He says a number of factors drew him to be a participant in Smiles Change Lives, not the least of which was the organization's

many partnerships that support doctors in providing the utmost in care. Labs donating retainers and other partners donating inventory such as brackets and wires have been a huge help in not just the treatment offered to the Smiles Change Lives children but also in the number of patients that can be treated.

"What we're doing is basically giving our expertise," Dr. Thomas explains. "All the sister organizations help us get to the final goal. ... With a lot of other organizations, no one really helps [an office] once they take the case. With Smiles Change Lives, it's more of a group effort."

Smiles Change Lives exclusively serves children, usually between the ages of 7 and 16. But, Dr. Thomas says, "Once we start our own foundation, I hope to not have that [restriction] because a lot of adult patients need help, too."

He notes 50 percent of Center City Orthodontics' patients are adults. "We're not a typical orthodontic practice," he explains. "There are different reasons adults are being more aware; in a lot of situations, they didn't have access to care when they were younger, and now they are adults with jobs and can afford treatment."

Others, he explains, may have had treatment in the past but have teeth that have shifted over the years for one reason or another. "Treating adults is more challenging," Dr. Thomas says, noting other issues such as root canals, crowns, missing teeth and gum problems come into play. There is the added factor that most adults are reluctant to have traditional braces placed on their teeth.

For such individuals, there are options, such as aligner therapy via programs such as Invisalign, which can be used in certain cases, as well as custom-manufactured lingual—or, behind the teeth—braces. For many patients, Dr. Thomas can offer a combination of therapies to make adult tooth alignment as painless, and the least embarrassing, as possible.

While Dr. Thomas has enjoyed his time as a Smiles Change Lives practitioner greatly, he has his sights set on helping an even wider array of people by forming his own charitable organization.

"There desperately needs to be more providers," Dr. Thomas says. "Our goal over the last three years has been to be a 'game changer' and an example to other practices that you can be successful and do philanthropic work at the same time."

Currently, Dr. Thomas sees one patient a month for a total of 12 patients a year through Smiles Change Lives. Altogether if one factors in the average price of orthodontic treatment of \$5,000 per case, this totals \$60,000 in charitable treatments annually. But, Dr. Thomas wants to do more with his own foundation.

"My goal is five patients a month because I think we're in a position to do that and almost all the practices I know are in a position to do that," he says. This would mean a total of 60 patients each year and a grand sum of \$300,000 in care costs.

"It's been absolutely rewarding to see what we do and the impact it has on patients' lives," he says. "Patients are so incredibly thankful and I can tell you, they absolutely do get the value of what's been done for them."

While he and colleagues are still working on finalizing the details, Dr. Thomas says he hopes his organization will be able to help children and adults who cannot afford orthodontic care but desperately need it. The goal he and his team have is to start a foundation all their own 24 months from now.

Dr. Thomas, who underwent orthodontic treatment from the ages of 14 to 17, also had jaw surgery to correct his smile. This, he says, "totally changed my life. From a self-confidence perspective, it was transforming." It even gave him the confidence to ask out the girl he ended up marrying 12 years later. ■

