



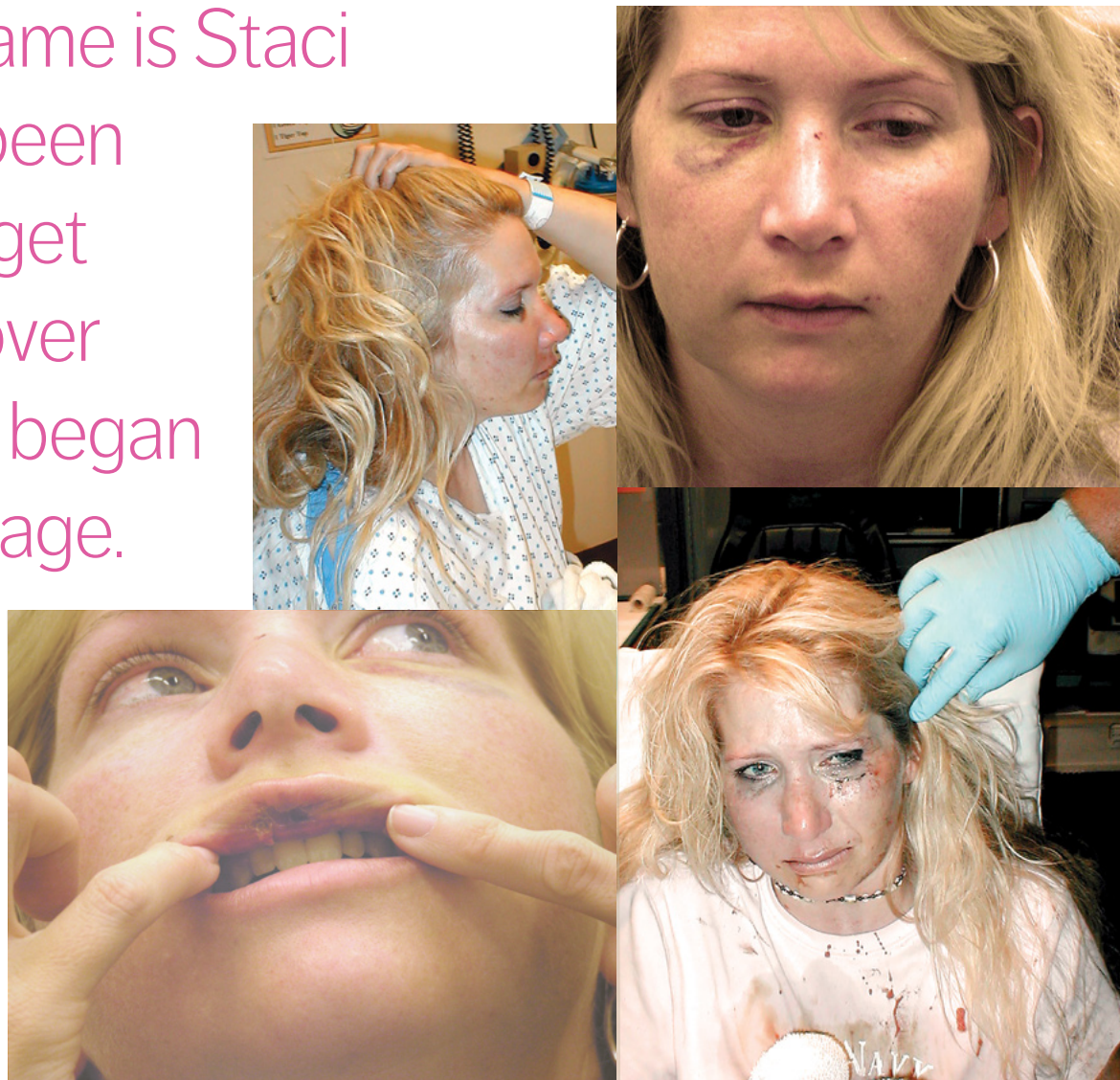
# Staci's Story

A new life begins...

BY NANCY LASHLEY



“Hi, my name is Staci and I’ve been trying to get help for over 12 years”, began her message.



She continued, “I was brutally attacked in August 2004”, and she went on to say briefly and simply that her jaw and teeth were “clicked back into place” at the emergency room as a result of the trauma. Of much more concern to her was the loss of “herself” because of the loss of her smile and the pain and suffering she had endured every single day since.



"I've been to numerous dentists trying to get someone, anyone to help me. I've been given quotes for treatment from \$4000-\$17000, all with no resolution...." she wrote. "Last week I was told my teeth could not be saved, but the week before another dentist said they could. The thing that upsets me is that I went in for an emergency last week for my latest infection and now I'm on a cancellation list, scheduled to be seen five months from now. Now, I'm not a doctor but I'm in severe pain, have an infection, a swollen face, and I feel sick - but I'm on a cancellation list?!"

She didn't have insurance but that didn't matter to her; she just wanted the pain to finally go away. She ended her pain-filled message with "I'm sorry for the long note, but when I saw you on Facebook and read all your reviews I had to try. I've been begging for someone to help me for over 12 years."

Of course we brought her in, the last patient on the schedule before the long Thanksgiving holiday weekend. She arrived, protected by one of her signature hoodies and, despite all our five-star reviews she had mentioned, was fully prepared for another dehumanizing dental experience. Instead, she got

me, our practice's reining priestess of what we call "the church of dentistry".

Now may be a good time for me to tell you, briefly, about our practice and myself. I am now a partner in a dental practice, but it was not always so. Those of you who know me, know the story of my husband's and my life, but for those of you who don't, here it is in a nutshell. Fifteen years ago I started a dental marketing company, Athena Marketing, and twelve years later found myself marrying my first client and longtime good friend, Dr. John Sullivan, who during that time had become among other accomplishments an Accredited member and Past President of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry. This organization is important to the story, so stay alert. Move a few years forward, and we both are working at our insurance free dental practice here in my hometown of Eugene, Oregon, and that's how I found myself

responding to a Facebook message from another new patient.

So, as I was talking with this newest patient, Staci, in my tiny office that late Wednesday afternoon, in short order I got through her defenses with the most nefarious of tactics: I cared about who she was, what she had gone through and how we could best be of service.

She went on to tell me a gut-wrenching story of a brutal home invasion. She said that she and her daughter had fallen asleep on their couch watching a "Friends" marathon when, at about 1 AM, someone kicked their door down and came after her then 15-year-old daughter. When Staci intervened, he went for her instead, subduing her resistance by kicking her face in with his steel-toed boots.



Thank God the neighbors heard the screams and called 911, saving both Staci and her daughter from the worst, and ultimately sending him to prison for twelve years. But since then, she'd felt that a vital part of her was missing, and feared she would never get her "self" back. She experienced constant pain in her jaw, fear for her remaining teeth, and frustration with doctors, dentists and oral surgeons not being able to help her.

I reassured her that there simply is no better dentist, or man, in our entire county than my John, and she was exactly where she was meant to be. As it happens, we bonded and I sent her on to the back where he, of course, blew her mind, as I knew he would, with again, the most nefarious of tactics: he cared about who she was, what she had gone through,

and how we could best be of service.

*By the time she left that evening she was in tears and we were elated by our shared love of dentistry. We went home to celebrate a true "Thanksgiving", telling our family the story of how this incredible woman had gone through such a terrible ordeal and suffered for so long.*

How, as she told it to me, after a dozen years of dead ends, lost teeth and thousands of dollars thrown away, she had finally found herself at her wits end, crying in frustration, kneeling on the floor, and swearing to her sister that she just couldn't do it anymore. How one of my silly Facebook ads popped up on the screen in her hand. How she clicked on it and read about us, read our patients' heartfelt and unsolicited reviews. How

divine intervention had lead her to our little church of dentistry. How this is what we live for, what we practice for. What we all do dentistry for.

That next Tuesday morning, we were sitting at the front desk when two ladies who were not on our schedule and who we did not recognize walked in. John left me there to realize that it was "our Staci" standing before me, bringing in her sister to meet us. Think about that: this woman, who had been the last patient we'd seen just the week before, with whom we'd spent almost two hours and talked about all weekend long, was truly unrecognizable to us both only days later. This woman at the counter was beautiful. She was sparkling. She was smiling. She was transformed by hope and the confidence that she had found a path back to herself.





This woman was the real Staci, our Staci. She was the magic of dentistry personified. You know, that inexplicable magic when a soul comes back to life before your eyes.

We quickly got to work triaging the most pressing issues and over the course of a few visits, Staci and I bonded even further. Well, like most of you, I bond with all our patients, but Staci was special. She was so happy to be relieved of the pain, the infection and the feeling that she'd never be herself again.

Then, right after the New Year, she lost her job and her newly earned dental benefits. She was crushed. The original shattered and shuttered Staci who'd first visited us reappeared. The beautiful, hope-filled woman vanished.

I was crushed to lose "our Staci" but I was determined to see her through, to get her back. As John will tell you, I can be a bulldog.

I remember so clearly what happened next.

We were in our Op 2, and John was in the lab "MacGyvering" her new bite splint, which he'd made to fix the excruciating pain from those boots knocking her jaw out of alignment. I was in the operatory with her, as I often was during visits to help with her anxiety, seated in the cushy visitor's chair and racking my brain for a way, any way, to maybe involve our tight knit Oregon community in raising funds to help her at least cover the lab bill, to help the victim of what must have been a shocking home

invasion to finally heal. It must have been in the news back then, I thought. I was friendly with our area's favorite news anchor, who is always wanting a good story to balance out the rest of her taxing job. Surely we could do something.

I looked up at her then and finally saw, finally understood, the whole truth of that horrific night a dozen years ago. I finally saw what had really happened to Staci and her daughter. Finally I understood whose feet wore those boots. "You knew who it was, didn't you?" I asked.

"Yes," she admitted, and inexplicably ashamed, the whole story rolled out. The steel-toed boots had belonged to her husband of only a month, whom she had attempted to leave.

After letting her know she was safe and loved despite this revelation, I said "wait right here, sweetheart." I jumped up, jumped to John's side in the lab and in my glee to have finally found a candidate after months of trying exploded "we finally have a Give Back A Smile client!"

### **Restoring Lives By Restoring the Smiles of Survivors of Domestic Violence.**

Give Back A Smile is the very active charitable foundation of the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD) with a mandate to restore the smiles of survivors of domestic violence. My John, being John, had already delivered seven Give Back A Smile (GBAS) cases in the ten years of its existence down at his original practice in California, and it was high on our list when we opened our doors in Eugene to connect with our local shelter and find a candidate.

I had met with the local shelter's executive director months before Staci arrived, but being a survivor is no small feat. It often takes superhuman powers and community support to extricate yourself from an abusive relationship, to establish a new life, to will yourself back to life. I'm sorry to say that too few who try make it. And for those who do - but also get to carry their scars in their smile - life is that much harder. We all know how important a stable smile is to every aspect of a happy life,



so can you imagine trying to reinvent yourself while your smile is crushed?

#### **Impossible.**

That's why the Give Back A Smile volunteers - including dentists and their teams, laboratories and their technicians and even manufacturers and their representatives - just do it. No one gets paid. No one gets a "take" of any funds raised. No one does it for extra credit or any credit at all, as it's often anonymous - recipients don't have to and rarely want to tell their story publicly. They're simply grateful to get their lives back and move on, and we require nothing more.

So we do what we've been trained to do and give them back their smiles. For us it's simple, but to the survivors it's a miracle.

That day last spring, looking at Staci sitting in Op 2, I was ecstatic and astonished. Ecstatic because I was about to deliver her the gift of her self back. Astonished that I hadn't figured it out sooner.

#### **You Are the Front Line.**

We are literally on the front lines with our patients - all of us. We personally bond with them; we know the names of their pets, their grandchildren, their favorite kind of tea. And we're the ones who - if we just knew what to look for - could find the silent survivors among our beloved patients. Frankly, I excel at understanding people, but I simply hadn't seen it - or maybe I'd just been too self-involved to think it through. But that didn't matter that day - what mattered was that we were going to get our Staci back.



And then it got even better.

**You see, Staci is herself a miracle.** Seated again in Op 2 months later, after we'd restored her smile, she told John, as he was finishing up her final appointment that she would not have accepted the gift of Give Back A Smile without doing something, anything, to pay it forward. Unbelievably, she had chosen to pay it forward by publicly telling her story during sweeps week, on our top rated news station.

Working with our local top-rated anchorwoman, who through the process became a great friend, we made certain that it would be all about Staci and her story: about her survival, how she found her way out of it and how found herself by speaking up. And she almost unconsciously made certain that in telling her story, she found a way to connect with everyone watching, to connect it all back to them. She was a natural and I'd never seen anything like it.

The old Staci, the shattered and shuttered and sweat shirted Staci, would never have spoken up. But something changed when "our Staci" came back to life. She found her voice and found the courage to tell her story because she knew that someone out there would be listening. Someone who, like her dulled self, felt alone with their suffering. Or maybe someone who was actively being forced to suffer and needed to see a light at the end of their tunnel in order to light their way out of their abyss. Maybe someone who needed to see courage in someone else, like Staci, in order to find it, finally, in him or herself.

**Participate in the magic of a life being restored with a simple smile.**

We all need purpose in our lives and our work. If you're like me, you get soul food from the connections you're already making with your patients. But what if it could go further? What if the thread of those

connections could take you through the superficial and into the joy of bringing a silent sufferer back to life? To turning a fake smile into a real one.

**If your soul could use more purpose, I encourage you to not only widen your heart and eyes to what may be waiting to be recognized, but to look into Give Back A Smile and the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry, and see if their mission and yours are connected as well. For our little practice, it is the lifeblood that keeps our philosophy of paying forward a constant realization.**

**We previewed Staci's story of domestic abuse in the last edition. As dental professionals, we know you see other cases of abuse and neglect. We're thankful that, with your help, not every tragedy has a sad ending. Staci's transformation began during the Thanksgiving holiday last year and this year she has so much to be thankful for. Thank you, Dr. John Sullivan, Nancy Lashley, and your phenomenal team.**

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