

WISH LIST

Mom finds plenty to smile about



AUGUST 12, 2013 3:45 AM • [BARB ICKES](#)
BICKES@QCTIMES.COM

The final straw was a front tooth falling out. Heather Bohlander already knew despair, but that front tooth was too much. At just 36 years old, Heather's teeth were so broken and rotted, she was embarrassed to leave the house.

A serious gum infection at 16, along with a family history of poor dental health, had left her mouth a mess. She wouldn't even go to the grocery alone,

fearing someone would speak to her, and she would have to open her mouth to answer.

When her two older kids, now 16 and 12, were in grade school, Heather was a devoted volunteer. She was "room mother" at the kids' school and was always the first parent to step up when something needed doing. She loved it.

"I threw myself into my kids' stuff, because their education has always been my most important job," she said. "I remember the day I stopped going. I was working at a book fair, and you know how kids can be. They don't mean anything by it, but a couple of them asked, 'Why are your teeth rotten?'

"I didn't go back. My youngest is in the third grade, and I haven't been to her classroom."

Instead, Heather hid out alone at her Rock Island home while the kids went to school and her husband went to work. She isolated herself from her friends, too.

Then, the depression grew darker. Anxiety over the leaving the house turned to panic attacks.

Knowing she needed help, Heather went to Transitions Mental Health Services in Moline. She was frank about her feelings and told counselors how much her life had changed. She talked about having pieces of her crumbling teeth in her mouth when she woke up in the morning. She wondered if people thought she was a crack addict.

Since Transitions is a recovery-based organization, workers there started looking for ways to help. A call to Bethany for Children and Family Services rang into the office of Chris Allers, coordinator for the Give Kids a Smile Program.

Allers then turned to one of several dozen Quad-City area dentists who give their time and expertise to kids whose parents cannot afford their dental care.

"I knew Dr. (James) Bishop would help us," she said of the Moline dentist who has been

-serving Bethany's Give Kids a Smile program since its inception. "We also contacted River Valley Oral Surgery, and they agreed to donate part of the cost for the extractions."

The process had begun.

In May, Heather had her remaining teeth pulled — top and bottom. Some already were gone and many were broken.

"I didn't realize, when I went to have the teeth pulled, I had an infection," she said. "I woke up from the anesthesia crying. I was in pain for a good three days. I dropped 16 pounds during that time. I always look for the bright side."

The reduced price of \$1,500 was paid for with donations from Wish List Quad-Cities, which is a Quad-City Times-sponsored campaign to raise money for Quad-Citians with specific needs. Most of the donations are collected between Thanksgiving and Christmas each year and distributed shortly after, based on nominations by area social-service agencies. When Heather's case came to Wish List organizers' attention, the money was set aside.

Then Dr. Bishop took over, donating his time and that of his staff to make sure Heather was properly fitted with dentures. Precision Dental Designs, Davenport, came through with donated lab work for the dentures.

Two weeks ago, Heather had her first fitting.

"From the moment they were in my mouth, I was totally blown away," she said, smiling. "I had to go back a couple times, so they could adjust them. Now they're perfect. There's no adhesive. I don't eat with them, yet, but I will. It takes six months to a year before my gums will sort of mold into the dentures.

"Everything has changed. I wake up every day with a smile on my face, knowing it's going to be a great day. I look forward to going out, even to the store. I stop and talk to people, which I used to love to do.

"Now I'm ready to get out there. I want a job. I used to think no one would ever give me a job because of the way I looked."

The depression and anxiety are gone. The darkness began to lift, she said, as soon as she knew her teeth would be pulled. Every day since then, her life has gotten better.

"This is what is meant by a life-changing experience," she said, smiling still. "I don't know if people who donate their money or their time realize they are completely changing a person's life. Without this, I really don't know where I'd be right now. I was going into a very dark place. I had not seen the light for a very long time."

A big part of the brightness, she said, came from Dr. Bishop and his staff.

"All they cared about was making me happy," she said. "I tried to explain in a thank-you note how life-changing this has been."

He got the message.

"Heather wrote me the nicest thank-you note I ever received," Bishop said Friday. "She's a natural winner, and she found a way to succeed. Sometimes things just work out, and we're happy we could help her."

Reluctant to take credit, Bishop pointed out there are about 90 dentists who serve the Give Kids A Smile program.

"Heather got through a system not necessarily designed for her (because it is geared toward children), and it just worked really well."

Now the smile won't leave her face.

"The people at school are going to get sick of me, because I can't wait to get back," she said. "I'm ready for anything now. Bring it on, world!"