

Yes, these dentists do have a heart

Program helps those who can't afford it get smiles back

BY JUDY BUCHENOT

For Sun-Times Media

Brenda Francis, of Midwest Dental Implantology in St. Charles, still remembers one particular phone call a few years ago. "Is this the office that has dentists who have a heart for a day?" asked the caller.

The answer was "yes." The practice is one of many area dentist offices that offers free dental services during the month of February as part of the Dentist with a Heart program.

Francis, who is the treatment coordinator at the office, says staff are pleased to confirm they do have a heart for a day and are happy to report they will have a heart again this year.

This will be the 14th year of the program that was started by Dr. Gary L. Ahasic and Dr. Brian Tonner, both with Fairview Dental in Aurora.

"Dr. Tonner and I had been trying to help people on public aid, and we could never catch up, Ahasic" says. "I read about a Dentist with a Heart program in a different community and thought it was a great idea."

The first year 13 dentists participated in the program. This year there will be 53 dentists offering services, according to Ahasic.

Ahasic says many clients come in with very serious dental issues.

"We always see a lot of patients with huge cavities in their front teeth," he says. "They hide their mouths when they talk or eat so their teeth don't show. We are able to fill those teeth and hand them a



Dr. Tricia Crosby of Midwest Dental Implantology in St. Charles extracts a tooth for a patient during a past Dentist with a Heart Day. | SUBMITTED

mirror to see the difference. We give them their smile back."

A few years ago, Ahasic recalls caring for a patient with a swollen area in his mouth during Dentist with a Heart. Ahasic suspected that the patient had mouth cancer and quickly referred him to others for help.

The diagnosis was confirmed, and the patient underwent treatment for the cancer.

"A year later, I got a call from his mother who thanked me for saving her son's life. It feels good to know we are making a difference," Ahasic says. "We have seen some patients year after year, and we are able to help them prevent problems, so we are making a dent in all the need that is out there."

The dentists often receive thank you notes and phone calls expressing gratitude for their services.

One very grateful patient was Pam Carico, an Aurora resident who suffers from numerous medical issues.



Dr. Martin Kolinski and dental assistant Racquel Bryja of Midwest Dental Implantology in St. Charles provide free dental care to a patient during a Dentist with a Heart event. | SUBMITTED

"I am on disability, and I just don't have the money to go to the dentist," Carico says.

"I knew my teeth needed help, but I just couldn't afford it. Then I read about Dentist with a Heart, and I went to Dr. Ahasic who helped fix several problems with my teeth. I am so thankful that now I can chew and eat without pain. I have a better smile. "I can't tell you how much it meant to get help fixing my teeth."

More than \$14 million in free dental services have been offered to more than 3,500 patients during the past 13 years, according to Ahasic.



Dental hygienist Jane Orr of Midwest Dental Implantology in St. Charles talks with a young patient to get him ready for a free teeth cleaning during a Dentist with a Heart program. | SUBMITTED

IF YOU GO

All services are first-come, first-served, and some practices ask for appointments. Patients between the ages of 3 and adult are accepted and children ages 3 to 18 must be accompanied by an adult. There is no qualifying interview required. Services are free for those who seek them. For additional information about types of services available at each practice, visit www.dentistwithaheartonline.org. Find Dentist with a Heart programs at the following times and locations:

TRI-CITIES AREA

- Feb. 4 — 8 a.m. to noon: Dr. Brian Penniall, 40W330 LaFox Road, Suite C1, St. Charles
- Feb. 5 — 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.: Drs. Lynn O. Lipskis, Edmund Lipskis and Krysta L. Lillard, 516 E. Main St., St. Charles
- Feb. 5 — 8 a.m. to noon: Drs. Elizabeth Sacrey and Scott Capper, 328 N. Anderson Blvd., Geneva
- Feb. 7 — 8 a.m. to noon: Dr. Timothy Skidmore, Mill Creek Dental, 9w250 Herrington Blvd., Suite F1, Geneva
- Feb. 7 — 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.: Dr. Rose Vivirito, appointment only, 630-377-9007, 2210 Dean St., Suite J1, St. Charles
- Feb. 10 — 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.: Dr. Melissa Jentz-Cote, Geneva Family Dental, 2631 Williamsburg Ave, Geneva
- Feb. 12 — 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.: Dr. Robert Davidson, 708 N. Main St., Elburn