

HEALTH

Smiles are all Heaven D.

Volunteers help fit people with coveted dentures

BY CAROL SOUTH
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TRAVERSE CITY — How do you say thank you when somebody changes your life?

A note, a hug, a smile are a good start.

Ben Bearden, 32, went well past smiling and into ear-to-ear grinning after his dentures were fitted Sunday afternoon. One of 20 recipients of a new set of teeth thanks to Heaven D.E.N.T.. Bearden greatly appreciated the volunteer dentists, technicians and staff who created his new smile.

"I feel very, very fortunate," he said. "It's been a big change already."

Heaven D.E.N.T. (or, Delighting the Edentulous with New Teeth) came about thanks to Dr. David Swan, a dentist with Traverse Dental Associates, and Doug Baker, founder of D.H. Baker Dental Laboratory. The friends and colleagues together set up the program, which served 20 people selected by the Traverse Health Clinic.

Heaven D.E.N.T. is thought to be the first free denture clinic in Michigan. Participants are adults of all ages who otherwise could not afford dentures.

"These particular clients are very often the working poor," said Swan, who con-

ceived of Heaven D.E.N.T. with his wife, Lynn, who is medical director of the Traverse Health Clinic.

The Traverse Health Clinic is a network of volunteer physicians and practitioners who have provided health care to the uninsured and underserved since 1975. The clinic works with more than 2,500 people each month and offers access to services including primary care and specialty care, vision, dental, mental health services and outpatient hospital services.

Until Sunday afternoon, Melody, who declined to give her last name, had been wearing the same set of dentures since 1977. With the teeth worn down to "little tiny nubbins," her self-confidence plummeted. She would not smile or eat in public.

"When you are very aware of how your smile looks, you don't smile as much or as often as you probably would. It'll take a little bit to get used to them."

Melody, a recipient of dentures thanks to the Heaven D.E.N.T. program

"I've checked into it over the years, into getting new teeth, and it's always been way, way too expensive," she said.

She kept checking with the Traverse Health Clinic about getting a new set but until Heaven D.E.N.T. it was not possible.

"Dentures are kind of a lower priority as opposed to urgent dental needs," Melody said.

Heaven D.E.N.T.'s structure of an intense two-day marathon lured in many helpers, who otherwise find it challenging to carve out consistent time to help people in need over numerous appointments. The concept of having one concentrated weekend netted eight

dentists, including a professor from the University of Michigan who brought three dental students.

"My hope is it will become an annual event," said Swan. "If it works well, it is certainly something we could share with others around the state."

In all, an estimated \$50,000 in time and materials were donated during the weekend-long marathon.

"It is always a great feeling to help others and I know everyone involved has a passion for supporting our community," said Baker, noting that three local dental laboratories besides his participated: Starcast, Rushton and Schumacher.

Ivoclar Vivident Corp., one of the largest dental material supply companies in the world, donated all the materials, said Baker.

Heaven D.E.N.T. began a few weeks ago with a preliminary exam. The process began in earnest on Saturday morning with 20 fittings. All impressions went over to Baker Dental Laboratory, where a team worked through the night and into Sunday morning to create the dentures.

On Sunday afternoon, the clients returned for their fitting, leaving with a new smile plus a boost in personal and social confidence. In addition, an increased ability to bite and chew can mean eating a wider and healthier variety of food, helping overall health.

"When you are very aware of how your smile looks, you don't smile as much or as often as you probably would," added Melody. "It'll take a little bit to get used to them."

For more information on the Traverse Health Clinic, call 935-0668 or see www.traversehealthclinic.com.



Dr. Phillip Yancho makes final adjustments to Bearden, 32, of Traverse City, on Sunday as part of Heaven D.E.N.T. program. The professional collaborator technicians made and fitted dentures for 20 Trave