



Shayna West, in the days after a sky-diving accident that left her with multiple injuries, faces a brighter future as she shows off her new set of teeth to Dr. Alan Meltzer, who performed the surgery for free.

Putting His Money Where Her Mouth Is



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Throughout her life, Shayna West had a recurring dream that her front teeth were falling out. When she moved her tongue around her mouth on Oct. 9, 2005, and felt open space in place of her front teeth, she couldn't help but again believe she was dreaming.

"I'm going to wake up from this," she recalls thinking. "A couple more teeth'll fall out, and then I'll wake up."

But West was awake, and her missing teeth were a reality — as were the three breaks in her pelvis, her broken leg and her facial fractures. She suffered her injuries in the course of sky-diving, and because her parachute did not open properly, she plummeted to the ground — face first — at 50 mph.

Later at the hospital, she also found out she was pregnant.

During the months that passed, the now 22-year-old native of Joplin, Miss., had metal plates inserted to replace pieces of her skull, and to support her eyes and face. She gave birth to a son, Tanner, who fortunately turned out to be healthy. But financially, West and her husband, Rick, found themselves in increasing trouble.

"It caused me to lose my job, my car; credit cards got out of control," she said, "and we ended up filing for bankruptcy."

Aside from her money problems, she was left without a permanent set of teeth, and the procedure to replace them proved to be a tricky one given all the plates in her face.

After her story appeared in certain magazines and on television, dentist Alan Meltzer of Voorhees, N.J., decided to give her dental implants for free.

"Somebody had to be smiling on her; this is an unusual situation to survive that kind of fall and for the baby to survive," said Meltzer, a member of Temple Emanuel in Cherry Hill.

He noted that he does "a couple" of pro bono cases per year, including work on Jewish immigrants from Russia. He chose to help out West due to her dire financial situation and her amazing tale of survival.

"God was looking out for her, and I was touched by that," he said.

When she found out that the surgery would be in late January, West was understandably emotional.

"I honestly cried," she said, noting that she had received similar offers from dentists in the Midwest, but nothing ever materialized. "When it really sunk in that we were going to really work this out, I was completely in awe. I love Dr. Meltzer!"

BREAKAWAY FEATURE

Because of West's facial fractures, Meltzer implanted a set of teeth built with a breakaway feature in case she ever again suffers significant trauma to her mouth.

"She has all these plates and screws in her head," he said. "I

don't want all the force, if there's another impact, to break all her bones again."

The roots of the teeth were set in the jaw bone, and each replacement tooth was made with a small gold screw that holds the cap and the rest of the tooth together. While that gold screw is strong, it is not quite as strong as the rest of the implant.

"The concept is, a chain is no stronger than its weakest link," said Meltzer, "so we build in the system a weak link. So if there is trauma to the area or a blow, that's where it's going to break away."

In the event that the top portion of her tooth were to come free, Meltzer said that he would only need about 15 minutes to reattach it.

"It's very simple," he said. "It's like changing a light bulb; it's not a surgical procedure to change it."

Meltzer even got a molding of West's teeth taken years earlier, and now her smile is not only repaired — she feels like she has her old set back.

"They are a spittin' image of my original teeth that I knocked out," she practically gushed.

Another surprise to West was that the procedure was not all that painful. "I probably had six surgeries to date," she said, "but this is the only one where I didn't need narcotic drugs" for pain afterward.

Despite the grueling ordeal, West has not given up on her high-flying hobby, and would not rule out future forays in the air.

"If the day comes when [my son] wants to jump," she said, "I'll be jumping out of the plane right there with him." ♦