



Building a Better Practice

Orthodontist keeps his assistants smiling with ingenuity and compassion

By Duffy Kelly

There's something unusually uplifting about walking into Dr. Michael Payne's Arden area orthodontic office. It's not only the decorations, the color, cookies and contests that seem to celebrate visitors. What really stands out is the warmth that comes from his orthodontic assistants.

As it turns out, there's a very good reason Payne's assistants are all smiles: Payne himself.

"He believes in us," says the office manager, Cheryl Winckel. "He sees the potential in all of us and knows we are all capable of doing and learning so many things. If every company operated like that, we would be a much happier world."

Not only is Payne the kind of guy who cuts his own pay rather than furlough an employee during a recession: He believes so much in the abilities of office staff that he's integrally involved in making the future brighter for orthodontic dentals assistants throughout the state.

As a member of nearly every dental and orthodontic society, Payne is helping create a broad shift in the training and career paths for orthodontic assistants by establishing a standardized training program that provides stepping stones to greater knowledge, responsibilities and duties than assistants typically have had in the past.

It's a plan that is making for some highly motivated and challenged staff members who aren't just bending wires, but understanding every aspect of orthodontics. And it's a plan born



Orthodontist Michael Payne examines a patient at his Arden area practice

out Payne's desire to elevate the role of the assistant for the benefit of the patient.

"I don't want my staff to just know how to put how a wire in," Payne says. "I want them to know every element—torgue, retraction and center of rotation, and all things related to the mechanics of orthodontists. It makes their job much more interesting

to know why and how things are happening. I like to help them learn the whole process."

After a globetrotting and expansive career as an Air Force dentist, oral surgeon and prosthodontist in Arizona, Guam, Hawaii and England, Payne sunk his teeth into orthodontia and settled into private practice with Dr.

James Peck on American River Drive in 1998.

Amid thousands of cases of braces, Payne became passionate about helping orthodontic dental assistants develop satisfying lifelong careers in orthodontia.

Plainly and simply, Payne believes anybody can do anything.

Payne inherited this core belief from a long line of Paynes who solved problems by hand-building solutions that paid off in spades.

Take, for instance, Payne's grandparents. They homesteaded in Montana in the 1950s, moving to a lodgepole pine forest. With an old Buick and an even older hay bailer, Payne's grandfather made a post peeler to convert the trees into fence posts and telephone poles.

"He didn't go down to Home Depot to buy what he needed," Payne says. "If he needed a table saw, he built his own."

Loaded with old-world ingenuity, the family built tailor-made heavy machinery, expanding their meager beginnings of a closet-sized room into a 22,000-square-foot machine warehouse. It's here where Payne got his first job at age of 6. "I didn't care what job I had, I was just happy to be working," he says.

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Before he could ride a bike, Payne threaded 2,000 six-foot bolts. And by age 14 he was working 11-hour days alongside his entire family, mother included.

"We all worked hard. My grandfather lost a thumb. My father lost a thumb. So I was pretty nervous about mine," he jokes.

Growing up watching his family dream and create products, Payne has an ability to not only make perfect smiles out of a mishmash of misfitting teeth, but also to design and build his own dental chairs, drawers, desktops and columns that house all kinds of loose cables, wires, clasps, clamps and assorted tiny pieces of hardware.

His you-can-do-it philosophy crossed over into orthodontia, where he's crafting a training model to create challenging careers for assistants statewide.

"I like them to know why they are doing things so they can be better assistants," he says. "That makes them more confident and gives them a sense of self-worth that they should have.



Michael Payne makes adjustments to a patient's braces

"This career is a lifelong learning process. Besides, it's a win-win-win situation that results in better patient care.

"If orthodontic assistants know why and how things are happening, it makes their job much more interesting to them. At my office, I like my staff to help with treatment plans and see if

they can figure out what we are going to do. I give them the X-rays and see what they come up with. It helps their confidence."

Payne is helping to build the curriculum other orthodontists will use to train their assistants. It should be available within the year.

"Dr. Payne will take time out of each day and explain things to us," Winckel says. "He teaches us and gives us duties that make us learn not only bending wires, but making appliances. He doesn't have to do that. He could just as easily have the appliances made in a lab. But he gives us the opportunity to do it twice, or three times, until we get it right. He has every faith that we can do the work."

The worst criticism you'll hear about Payne is that he's a bit of a perfectionist. However, that seems to be just what the doctor ordered, because after all these years building brighter smiles and his family history of losing fingers, Payne is still "all thumbs."

For more information about Payne's practice, go to AmericanRiverOrthodontics@aol.com or call 486-4233.

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