

# ADULTS FINALLY GETTING IT STRAIGHT



BRACES AREN'T  
JUST FOR TEENS  
ANYMORE —  
ADULTS ARE  
SMILING ABOUT  
THEM TOO

By Stacy Trevenon  
Photos by Lars Howlett



**Dr. Ken Stasun** holds a mold of a patient's teeth. These are made before the braces can be properly fit. The X-ray in the background depicts an overbite.

As No. 11 of 12 children, Jim Ward, drama and language arts teacher at Cunha Intermediate School in Half Moon Bay, knew his family couldn't afford to give him braces.

But while earning a degree in theater at New York University, and then as an acting hopeful in Los Angeles, he wished he'd had them early in life.

"It was something I'd always wanted to do," he said. "Even as a struggling young actor I wanted to start (braces) and couldn't."

When he auditioned for an NYU graduate program in theater, a director asked a particularly pointed question. "He asked to see my teeth," Ward said. "I felt like a horse."

But years later, when Ward turned 40, and both he and wife Susan were employed, "I felt like it was time to make that happen."

With that decision, Ward joined

a growing crowd that, for cosmetic or hygienic reasons, chooses orthodontic treatment. Braces aren't just for kids – as several Coastside grown-ups and Half Moon Bay orthodontists Alexa Alborzi and Ken Stasun will tell you.

“A lot of adults find they wanted to do it but the choices weren't as good before or a dentist said to them, ‘You need to do this,’” said Alborzi, who has practiced in Half Moon Bay since 2002.

In Stasun's sunny, multiple-chair Half Moon Bay office, where he's practiced since 1980, he often treats several generations in one family. “A grandmother always wanted her teeth straightened and a nice smile, so she does it with her granddaughter,” he said.

Or, as in Ward's case, teachers and students share the bond of braces. Shouts of “Hey, Mr. Ward!” greeted him from young fellow patients in Stasun's office.

### The root of the matter

A generation or more ago, families might not have been able to afford orthodontia, or techniques of the day could not do the job. But today, an estimated one-fourth of orthodontic treatment involves adults.

For any age, there are many reasons why. Overcrowded or misaligned teeth make brushing or flossing difficult, allowing bacteria and decay to flourish. They also make chewing a challenge, contributing to digestive problems, or cause uneven wear on teeth, resulting in gum inflammation or problems with restorations.

“If you have really, really snagged teeth, it's hard to keep your mouth clean,” said Stasun.

Limited treatment figures in complex restorations, when a dentist needs to do a bridge but must reposition teeth first. Orthodontia also addresses more serious problems: Stasun recalls patients with cleft palate helped by braces to regain normal eating patterns, or the patient with potentially fatal sleep apnea. Braces helped open up his airway.

Discomfort in the mouth, or a dentist's practiced eye, usually alerts patients to the need for orthodontia, but so does a wish for a nice smile. Cosmetic reasons account for a healthy chunk of orthodontist visits. Alborzi said that about half her patients come to her for physiological reasons and the other half for cosmetic reasons — a need to boost self-images that a lifetime of crooked teeth has soured.

“A majority come in because they realize it would be nice to have straight teeth,” said Stasun. “It's an amazing change, to see people who were once introverted, who smiled with their hand over their mouth. Because even with braces on, something's being done about it.”

Kids have time on their side. Growing, pliant tissues make change easier in a young mouth than in a mature one. Adult orthodontia may take longer and require slower, more gentle treatment to effect movement.

Assuming there are no prohibitive health concerns, anyone of any age can have braces. Though Alborzi said orthodontic treatment is not recommended for anyone under 7, her oldest patient was in the mid-70s, and Stasun's most senior patient was 10 years older than that. Patients tend to be



**Noelle Lane** of El Granada uses the Invisalign retainer, a modern technology that makes her dental work almost impossible to see.

## Alternatives to the old ‘metal mouth’

Braces were once little bands of metal cemented onto teeth, and worn along with headgear, sometimes little rubber bands, retainers and other odd gear.

Now, the science of making teeth look good has come of age.

**Veneers** are not conventional orthodontia but they do alter the appearance of teeth. They are surfaces placed on top of teeth that have been ground down to fit them. They are not permanent.

**Invisalign**, which Half Moon Bay orthodontist Alexa Alborzi uses, involves a series of clear aligners, similar to tooth-whitening trays and custom-made of medical-grade plastic for the patient, who replaces them every couple of weeks under the doctor's supervision. The manufacturing company, Align Technology, was founded in 1997, and since then has treated 480,000 patients. Invisalign is suitable for about 80 percent of patients, said Alborzi, especially given the fact that they tend to work fairly rapidly – often in 12 months – do not use wires or bands, are virtually unnoticeable and do not disrupt lifestyles. Half Moon Bay orthodontist Ken Stasun, though, finds them lacking in comparison to fixed appliances, citing findings by the American Board of Orthodontics Objective Grading System favoring quality of treatment with traditional bonded appliances over Invisalign. “I just elect not to use it,” he said.

**The Damon system**, a fairly new innovation billed as a new way of treating teeth, involves passive self-ligating braces with no elastic or metal ties, light high-technology and “shape-memory” wires for swift treatment. It is described as comfortable and swift, and is the only type of braces used by Alborzi.

— Stacy Trevenon



divided evenly between men and women, both said, though Stasun said his women patients slightly outnumber men.

While length of time and costs of treatment vary with patient, treatment methods or severity of the problems, most treatments range from a few months to two years and from \$2,000 to \$8,000. Doctors are often amenable to payment plans; Alborzi, for example, works out plans in which lower-income patients make an initial 20 percent down payment and cover the balance over time. Private companies offer plans to fit different budgets, and work details out with the doctor.

Treatment varies too. The metal bands of yesteryear, cemented to teeth and connected to wires or rubber bands, have given way to sophisticated, patient-friendly Invisalign or the Damon system.

Surgery does not replace braces but comes in for necessary extractions if teeth are just too crowded, or as part of the process. Stasun cites procedures in which a small chain is attached to an impacted tooth and to devices elsewhere in the mouth to gently pull the growing tooth in the right direction. But surgery has a down side: it can devitalize a tooth or, in a domino effect, weaken adjacent ones.

Many patients thrive with a combination of alternatives. And, for many, braces are a family affair.

#### Different bites

Constance Malach of El Granada grew up in a family that didn't believe in orthodontia, but in adulthood she could afford treating crooked front teeth that left her "always embarrassed to smile."

She consulted three potential doctors. One of them scared her: he recommended surgically breaking and then realigning her jaw. "I didn't think it was necessary to go to extremes," she said. "I didn't need a perfect mouth. I wanted a healthy mouth where my teeth looked good."

She wound up with an orthodontist in San Mateo, who started her on Invisalign and finished up with traditional braces between 1989 and 1992. She also asked a friend, Joel White of Miramar, a senior professor at the University of California,

San Francisco school of dentistry, to be her "braces coach" with encouragement and advice.

She went through stages that her predecessors knew well. Once the braces were on, she found it "the strangest sensation I ever had in my life — I thought I'd never get used to it." But with White's encouragement, she found that "the brain adapts... (to) this change in your

an adult in business, he had to be especially careful about bits of food in his braces — and as an Italian, he hated to give up pizza and pasta. But he also found a new bonding experience explaining to his 2-year-old twins why Daddy had braces.

Ward too found that braces helped him bond with family. His son Christopher also became a patient of



**Half Moon Bay orthodontist** Dr. Ken Stasun stands in front of bulletin boards filled with Polaroid photos of patients celebrating the removal of their braces.

mouth." But she winced more at the rules: no raw nuts, no hard candy, no gum and — what was worst — no popcorn.

Donald Miele of Half Moon Bay had watched a crossbite get worse throughout his life until, at 47, he decided he was "willing to go for it" and got brackets cemented on his teeth to which wires were attached. He found the whole experience not so bad — only two years, and costing under \$5,000, less than he'd feared — but "still formidable." The hardest part for him too was food — as

Stasun's. "I'd complain about stuff and he'd say, 'Oh, Dad, get over it,'" Ward said.

Christopher inherited his father's theatrical yen as well as his teeth. He's now majoring in theater at Cornish College of the Arts in Seattle and, said Ward, "as an actor, he's glad he had it done. It's one less hurdle actors have to go through."

Noelle Lane of El Granada now gives her most dazzling smile after three bouts with braces. Her teeth "almost cantilevered in," she said.

At 11, in order to make room for teeth



to grow into her small mouth, she had to have four permanent and six “baby” teeth extracted. At 12, she had conventional metal braces for a year-and-a-half. But as she grew, with extra room in her mouth, her teeth shifted. She had to have conventional braces again for six months, at 14. She says she did not wear her retainer as much as she should have.

After she grew up, her teeth shifted again, and she got braces again at 39, using Invisalign for eight months.

“Three times and I’m done,” she said. But she harbors no resentment over her preteen surgery. “That was what they did back then,” she said.

Now her daughter, Tessa, 9, wears braces with the Damon system, and son Cameron, 4, will have to have braces someday. She says her daughter is helped by the fact her mother had the same experience.

“She gets excited when she goes in,” Lane said. “She looks and sees how much closer they are to being all straight and properly aligned. For her, it’s a confidence-booster.”

Lane also has words of wisdom — about retainers.

“I want to say, see how old I am? You don’t want to be here at my age, so wear your retainer,” she said. “To all kids out there, wear your retainer. Or it’ll come back to haunt you.”

#### Getting braces off is a big day

Virtually all of the adults swapped their braces for a big smile.

Even while she chowed down on popcorn, Malach found that getting braces off was another learning experience. “My whole mouth felt slippery and smooth and my tongue kept looking around — what’s the difference?” she said with a laugh.

For Ward, it was a boost. “It made me feel more self-confident about smiling,” he said. “Now I feel confident when getting pictures taken. I see (early) pictures of myself, and go, ‘Euch.’ Now, I go, ‘It’s OK.’”

Miele found his big day was “very exciting. A big relief, and I was happy with the results” as he went out for a pizza and pasta dinner.

“Adults are great patients,” said Stasun. “They have usually put such thought into their oral health.” ✪



A dental assistant in Dr. Ken Stasun’s office sets out the hardware for a typical row of braces for the upper teeth.

**‘ADULTS ARE GREAT PATIENTS. THEY HAVE USUALLY PUT SUCH THOUGHT INTO THEIR ORAL HEALTH.’**

Dr. Ken Stasun, orthodontist

#### Brace yourself for some trivia

So you thought you were the only one to wear braces? Think again, because in the most recent generation braces showed up on people on television and on stage.

Braces showed up on characters on “The Cosby Show,” “Diff’rent Strokes,” “Gomer Pyle,” “Facts of Life,” “Love, American Style,” “Police Squad,” the “Tracey Ullman” show, “Zoom!” and others.

Braces were also evident on music videos for Soundgarden and Bonnie Raitt.

Other famous people with braces include: Olympic figure skater Tai Babilonia; first daughters Amy Carter and Chelsea Clinton; Swiss teen tennis champ Andreaw Jaeger, who wore them in competition; teen gymnast Kim Zymeskal, who wore them on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in the mid-1980s; and actor Tom Cruise in 2002.

#### Some facts about braces:

- ▶ Orthodontists need four years of college, four years of dental school, two years of postgraduate study and board certification in dentistry before they can practice.
- ▶ The first braces were constructed by Pierre Fouchard in 1728, consisting of a flat strip of metal attached to teeth by pieces of thread.
- ▶ Bands were invented in 1841, as strips of metal with a screw to adjust the size.
- ▶ If you are right-handed, you may tend to chew your food on the right side. Same with left-handedness.
- ▶ If one identical twin grows up without a certain tooth coming in, the other twin tends to grow up the same.
- ▶ If the roof of your mouth is narrow, you tend to snore since you don’t get enough oxygen through your nose.
- ▶ You are likely to get fewer cavities if you eat a bag of candy at one sitting than if you eat it a piece at a time all day.

— Stacy Trevenon