A Great Big Reason to Smile in Arizona

by Arselia Gales, Assistant Editor, Dentaltown Magazine

When you spend years, decades even, building a practice, it can be heart-wrenching to leave it. However, one must retire eventually. When Drs. Cliff Running and Todd Hellwig retired from a business that took about 40 years to build, they had the advantage of knowing it would be in good hands. Dr. Michael J. Bowen bought Running and Hellwig’s two locations (in Phoenix and Scottsdale, Arizona) in 2011 and renamed the business Great Big Smiles Orthodontics. Dr. Running had been Bowen’s professor years ago. All three doctors have a good relationship and the elder doctors even stop in from time to time to see how things are going. Some of the staff members who worked for Running and Hellwig are still with the practice and the team enjoys a close camaraderie.

The Phoenix practice is in a LEED-certified building, which is

OFFICE HIGHLIGHTS

Name: Michael J. Bowen, DMD, DHSc
Practice Name: Great Big Smiles Orthodontics
Post-grad ortho, class of 2010
Practice Locations: Phoenix and Scottsdale, Arizona
Practice Size: Small to Medium
Staff: 5
Website: GBsmiles.com
a point of pride for the staff there and for Dr. Bowen. Read on to learn how this family man with close-knit ties to the community balances orthodontics with fun while serving a large metropolitan population.

What drew you to orthodontics?

Dr. Bowen: I like to say that I learned to love dentistry because I spent a lot of time in the chair, and I did. My initial draw was to restorative dentistry after having my front tooth repaired. But my childhood orthodontist and orthodontic experiences in childhood were the biggest influences I had.

Tell me a little about your two practices. How are they laid out? What is a typical day like?

Dr. Bowen: We have an open-bay floor plan in each office. We also try hard to have an open policy for parents, siblings and patients. We know that sometimes there is an overly excited parent or child who hovers, but generally the openness is very well received and appreciated. We start our day at 6:45 a.m. with a huddle where we discuss the day at hand and any special needs. We try to review goals and get our own smiles warmed up. It’s crucial that we smile. Typically there is an early wave of patients and a late wave (I suspect it’s the same for most practices) which is when we’re really hopping. At the end of the day, the goal is to debrief. I’ll be honest; we don’t always get to that, but we try.

Because we have two offices, (one in central Phoenix and another in Scottsdale) but only one doctor for now, the team travels. We switch

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every Wednesday. That allows for the greatest balance of days over a month period. We work Monday through Thursday.

**What is your practice philosophy?**

**Dr. Bowen:** Nothing too crazy here: We are a personal, professional, fun and charitable office. These are our core values.

**Do you have partners or associates?**

**Dr. Bowen:** Not yet, but we are always on the lookout for a good fit.

**What sets Great Big Smiles Orthodontics apart from other practices?**

**Dr. Bowen:** In the Phoenix area there are some really really fantastic people and offices. However, I think our office culture sets us apart. I know that may sound cliché, but we really make sure we love our jobs and our patients. It is not uncommon to hear a staff member, or even the doctor, singing with the radio (or even against it). There is often a bit of light banter, joking and high-fiving. Our patients’ lives become part of our own.

We try to celebrate the successes of our patients in their areas of interest and even ask them to perform for us if they have a talent to share. It is not uncommon to see tears in our eyes as we share some of the life pains that our patients experience. [The atmosphere here] can be a bit irreverent at times, serious at others, and we do try to keep it professional, but overall it is a light but safe atmosphere where you can be more than a robot at work.

**What are your concerns for the new generation of orthodontists?**

**Dr. Bowen:** My concerns for new orthodontists are pretty much the normal ones that have been expressed in the recent past: debt load, geographic distribution, seeming increase in commoditization of the industry and the increase in sense that an orthodontist is just an expensive (or expendable) technician.

**Who are some of your mentors?**

**Dr. Bowen:** Many of my mentors are in the dental profession, others are not. Most are not big-shot public names. These are individuals who spent time with me, encouraged me, inspired me and had high expectations of me. To try to name them would inevitably be a problem as I’m sure I’d leave some out.

**What are your favorite marketing techniques? How do you ensure people learn about your practice?**

**Dr. Bowen:** I’m a firm believer that internal marketing to patients is critical now. External marketing to dentists is important and always will be, but I believe that for the time being, patient connections rule the day. The increase in technology leaves patients wanting a human connection more than ever (they may not even realize it) so when you can offer that or at least try, it makes a big difference. Of course social media is a necessary evil, but ultimately I think it’s about patients connecting with the doctor, team and brand of the office meaningfully.

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You're an active Townie and post frequently on Orthotown.com. How did you learn about Orthotown?

Dr. Bowen: I learned about Dentaltown when I was a dental assistant (three years in college prior to dental school). I learned about Orthotown more as a resident. Orthotown is a great place to share thoughts, gather thoughts and just toss out crazy ideas and see where they land. I shared one of my cases on the message board and am grateful for feedback and candid responses.

What do you think is the biggest problem the field of orthodontics faces today?

Dr. Bowen: I think the public (for various reasons) is having a harder time recognizing the benefit of having a trained specialist help them with their orthodontic needs. I also see the commoditization and emphasis of the role of technician over that of clinician as problematic over time.

What is the greatest advancement or change you have seen during your tenure as an orthodontist?

Dr. Bowen: I have not been doing this as long as some others, and consider myself early in my career, but I can say that surely intra-oral scanners are one of the biggest paradigm shifts that I have witnessed in the clinical treatment and management of patients.

Looking ahead, how would you like to see orthodontics operate as a profession in the next five to 10 years?

Dr. Bowen: Honestly, it may sound crazy, but I would like to see if we can find a way to be a more charitable specialty. This can be difficult due to the length of treatment and other factors, but organized charitable orthodontics can be done. Dr. Don Sanchez, my former director, and Dr. Ken Snyder from the Phoenix St. Vincent De Paul, figured out a way to provide services in downtown Phoenix and I'd love to see that sort of thing occur more. Not just individual charity (which many orthodontists already do), but actual organized charity.

Describe your most successful or rewarding experience in your professional life.

Dr. Bowen: I've had quite a few "life-changers", but they always come when I have delivered more than what I think I should have to a person who is grateful—like charity work.

Tell me about yourself and your hobbies. What do you like to do when you're not working?

Dr. Bowen: I was born and raised in Southern California and am the sixth son of eight children (six boys, two girls). I received a bachelor's of science in human development from Brigham Young University and served a Latter-day Saints mission for two years in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In fact, I've recently signed up to take Argentine Tango dance lessons. I'm still fluent in Spanish and love Latin patients. I married my wife of 15 years in college and we have four children together. I've lived in Arizona for 11 years and am a graduate of the Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health, which is where I completed my residency. I enjoy racquetball, hiking, camping, scuba diving, gardening and reading nonfiction books. I am partial to classical music, classic rock, 80s music, and of all things ... a capella.

I'm also very active in my church and enjoy spending time with my children. I enjoy long walks on the beach at sunset, but if you can handle sunrise it's even better, for real.