



In the Right Place

Dr. Rachel Maher, who founded **Dentistry for Children** more than 20 years ago, safeguards patients' smiles and advances her field by mentoring the next generation of dental specialists.

by **MATT COSENTINO** | photos by **ALISON DUNLAP**

As a dedicated pediatric dentist for more than two decades, Rachel Maher, D.M.D., understands as well as anyone that going the extra mile for patients comes with the territory, particularly when dealing with kids. That's why she never even gives it a second thought when emergencies arise—like this past Memorial Day, when she spent the last remaining hours of her holiday weekend tending to an 8-year-old who had fractured her two new, permanent front teeth in a fall.

"That's what we do: We help our patients when they need us," Dr. Maher says. "Some patients are more difficult than others, but that's why God made specialists, I suppose."

The many families who have brought their kids to Dentistry for Children—the Wilmington, Delaware-based practice Dr. Maher founded nearly 22 years ago—have come to expect that kind of service. Dr. Maher and her team provide children's dentistry, which includes dental exams, teeth cleanings, preventive sealants, tooth extractions, fillings, Invisalign, whitening, and cosmetic dentistry.

Dr. Maher welcomes patients from age 1 until they feel it's time to "graduate" to an adult dentist; many of her longtime older teenage patients return for their visits during college

breaks. No matter the patient, Dr. Maher and her team hold themselves to a high standard of care, and their easygoing demeanor helps them form quick connections with children and their families.

Longstanding patients might find it hard to believe, however, that pediatric dentistry was not on Dr. Maher's radar at first; she recalls being a little afraid of treating children while at University of Pennsylvania School of Dental Medicine. It wasn't until her fourth year, when she was fortunate to win an extended internship at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, that she started to see pediatric dentistry as her calling.

She went on to have similar training at Lehigh Valley Hospital, completed a general residency dental program at ChristianaCare Health Services, and completed pediatric specialty training at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center before starting her career.

"I love children and I enjoy the challenge—and it is a challenge every single day to deal with kids in pain or trauma—and that drew me to pediatric dentistry," she says. "I also realized that there weren't many pediatric dentists—I believe there were eight in the state when I did my residency—so I figured that would be a good stepping stone for me, and I would probably not have to look too hard for a job. I think the Good Lord has plans for people, and the doors and windows were opened for me every step of the way."

She credits many great mentors over the years for shaping her into the dentist she is today. In turn, she now tries to pass on her knowledge to the next generation of professionals. She volunteers as a pediatric dental attending at ChristianaCare, and loves getting one-on-one opportunities with her students, while also remaining close to the people who came before her. She invites her patients who show interest to intern at her practice, and she teaches them how to be dental assistants. As a result, they are ahead of the game when it comes time to apply for dental school.

"The dental community is close-knit, especially in Delaware, so if something comes up we can always call one of our mentors and get the information," Dr. Maher says. "But now we've become the mentors to the younger generation of dentists, which is pretty amazing, too. We all like to work together and make sure everyone is doing the right thing, especially in our state."

Dr. Maher furthers her leadership through her involvement in several local, state, and national dental organizations. She travels to the American Dental Association convention every year as an alternate delegate from Delaware. In addition, she was appointed to the Council on Dental Education and Licensure for the American Dental Association. She enjoys participating in the politics of dentistry at the House of Delegates meetings.

"I think it's important because it keeps me on top of what's going on, not just in Delaware, but across the country," she says.



"It's interesting to see what the trends are and how that information can help me be a better dentist and a better practice owner. I have the opportunity to run ideas by colleagues around the country and see what's working for them and how they handle some of the situations that we go through as business owners."

Dentistry for Children is a fun atmosphere for kids, with video games and arts and crafts in the waiting room. Screens show kids'

favorite movies while they are receiving treatment. For those who still may have some anxiety, Dr. Maher uses the "Tell-Show-Do" approach, making sure she explains in detail the procedure she is about to perform, lets the patient get a sense of what the procedure entails, and then moves ahead once the patient feels comfortable.

"You just have to do your best to talk them through it, and sometimes it's easier than others," she says. "As a specialty, we

tend to take care of a lot of the special needs patients, and there's nothing easy about some of those patients, but we have big hearts and we have a lot of patience. In combination with the extra training we received, that helps us through our difficult days."

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Dr. Maher urges parents to follow the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry guidelines for the first dental visit as six months after the eruption of the first teeth and no later than age 1. She likes to get patients in early to educate their caregivers and build strong habits at a young age; they discuss the patient's diet (juice is bad for teeth), habits (thumb and pacifier sucking), oral hygiene and home care, and teeth emerging patterns, to name a few.

She reinforces those lessons with the many preschool presentations she and her team give, usually during National Children's Dental Health Month in February. She also volunteers with multiple charitable organizations, such as Special Olympics, and has donated dental services in the amount of \$10.5 million to the Medicaid population of Delaware over her career.

It's safe to say that Dr. Maher's contributions in and out of the office have made her a fixture in the community; she's been doing it for so long that some of her former patients—meaning adults she treated when they were kids—are now trusting her with their own children's care.

"That just means I've been in practice for a long time," she says with a laugh. "But it's a great compliment for them to bring their own children here. That's really fun for me." ■



Dentistry for Children

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