

“You Gave Me Back My Smile”

By Shirley Gibson and Thomas Brooks

What can partnerships do? The answer – we can give people back their smile. Cancer Action received a grant from the HNC Living Foundation to begin a Pilot program providing dentures to head and neck cancer patients who have had their teeth removed due to treatment. HNC Living Foundation was formed in December 2013 by Tom and Teresa Walsh after she completed treatment for squamous cell carcinoma in her jaw. Executive Director, Chris Uithoven shared the foundation was

“established to assist head and neck patients live life fully during and after cancer through financial assistance. We invest and support other non-profits.” She goes on to say “the foundation is thrilled to be a small part and proud to help meet a need no one is meeting.”

Cancer Action and the HNC Living Foundation has partnered with Andrew VanBlarcom, DDS. Dr. Van Blarcom stated, “I am excited to collaborate with Cancer Action and participate in a dental program for head and neck cancer patients. Through my collaboration with Cancer Action, these patients can regain confidence and lost function and appearance, and can also enhance their chances for making a better future for themselves. “

Cancer Action’s first dental program client was head and neck cancer survivor, Thomas Brooks. Here is part of the letter Thomas wrote to Cancer Action: Cancer is a scary thing to go through, but for some reason, I always felt as I was going to make it through my treatment. However, one of the side effects of the cancer affected me more than any of the others on an emotional level. I’ve always been the type of person who greets people with a smile. Being able to greet my wife, daughters, and grandchildren with a smile seems so like it should be such a small thing. I survived cancer,



Dr. VanBlarcom and
Thomas Brooks

after all, but to me was very important. The particular treatment I had to go through made it so that my teeth would be pulled and the shape of my mouth would change. It was heartbreaking to me not to be able to do the one thing I have always done...smile.

I was preparing myself for not being able to afford the treatment I needed to get my smile back while I recovered from chemotherapy and radiation. I’d often try to do things to hide my mouth to overcome the embarrassment I felt from losing my smile.

Then, one day, I received a glimmer of hope. Lane Bowman informed me about a dental pilot program through Cancer Action and the HNC Living Foundation. If approved, I would be their very first patient. I filled out the paperwork and found out a few weeks later their grant had been approved and in turn, so had I. I began the process with Andrew Van Blarcom to fit me for dentures and my new smile. From start to finish, he did the entire process. The pride he took in his work was evident and I couldn’t have felt like I was in any better of hands.

Shirley Gibson with the Cancer Action helped make the process go smoothly and was a wealth of knowledge. These people and this program not only gave me back my teeth and smile, they changed a shame I felt about my mouth. I am forever grateful for their help and this wonderful program.

We often take for granted how important everyday things are in our lives. Due to losing my teeth, I lost 40 pounds during my cancer treatment. Chewing, eating, and smiling are some of those things we take for granted, but I no longer do. Thanks to this program, I can do all of those things again. To have my smile back was to stand tall again and I am so grateful for everyone who helped bring it back.