

SMILES FOR VETERANS



Joseph Daho (left) and Michael Stankewicz



Patricia DeVore

SINCE DEVORE CREATED SMILES FOR VETERANS IN 2015, THE GROUP HAS BEEN ABLE TO HELP FOUR VETERANS AND ONE MEMBER OF THE NATIONAL GUARD.

Auxiliary members in Illinois are changing veterans' lives, one smile at a time.

Montgomery and Bolingbrook Auxiliaries are connecting veterans and active-duty military personnel with dentists willing to offer their services at a reduced rate through an initiative called Smiles for Veterans – formed by Auxiliary 7452 President Patricia DeVore and also supported by Auxiliary 5917.

These Auxiliaries also finance (through fundraising and a few private donations) the balance of the negotiated-down cost of exams and procedures - dental surgery and/or restorative work - for veterans and soldiers who have been confirmed as in need of dental care that would otherwise be unattainable. The care is provided free of cost to veterans.

Smiles for Veterans gave retired Marine Sgt. Michael Stankewicz a new lease on life after a very dark chapter.

Stankewicz lost his wife to cancer in 2012. Devastated, a deep depression took over. He was in between jobs, and he couldn't eat much.

"I didn't think I was going to make it," he said. "I was probably on the brink of suicide. I just gave up on life."

Then his front tooth broke off and a back tooth cracked and became very painful.

“I thought, ‘Who would hire me now?’”

Stankewicz’ sister, Mary, had an idea. She knew about the good work a friend was doing with her Auxiliary and Smiles for Veterans. With the help of DeVore and other Auxiliary members, Stankewicz truly got his smile and his life back.

“When you look in the mirror and see a person who doesn’t want to open their mouth to smile, it’s depressing, especially when that person is you,” he said. “It is wonderful to have my smile back. I have my self-esteem back and newfound confidence. I have been applying for jobs and am looking forward to going back to work. Now I feel I at least have a chance to begin again, like a phoenix rising from the ashes.”

DeVore worked with Picayune Smiles in Mississippi – Stankewicz had relocated from Illinois – to restore Stankewicz’ smile at a reduced rate.

“I have the utmost respect for our military,” said Stankewicz’ dentist, Joseph Daho. “They sacrifice for us and we are truly blessed to have them protecting us. For me to give back and help was so rewarding and I’m happy I could.”

Since DeVore created Smiles for Veterans in 2015, the group has been able to help four veterans and one member of the National Guard. DeVore’s Brother, Doug Jones, a retired disabled Vietnam-era veteran who suffered tooth loss from his exposure to Agent Orange, was the inspiration for Smiles for Veterans.

Jones did not have access to dental insurance and was enduring so much pain, he had resorted to trying to remove his broken teeth with pliers. DeVore made it her mission to find a professional who could safely remove Jones’ remaining teeth and the roots that had broken off from the teeth he pulled out on his own. She had even hoped to help get her brother dentures, but bone loss kept him from being a good candidate.

“(Smiles for Veterans) means a lot to me because of my brother who served in the U.S. Army,” she said. “I knew there were other veterans suffering the same way and I knew we could help them. This is important to our entire VFW Auxiliary and Post 7452 because many veterans are suffering in silence with no dental care and no way to pay for it.”

Knowing that dental care can be cost-prohibitive for veterans, and that lack of dental care can lead to

serious infections and adverse health conditions, she said, “We hope to help many get their smile back by helping one veteran at a time through our program. It’s taking it straight back to the veterans.”

According to the VA, dental treatment within the VA health care system is limited by law. Eligibility and benefits are categorized into dental classifications based on very restrictive criteria and are applicable to specific veterans.

So far, Smiles for Veterans has paid nearly \$4,000

for dental care for veterans and soldiers that without negotiation, would have cost more than \$9,000. They’ve funded everything from oral surgery to remove impacted wisdom teeth to dentures and crowns.

“It’s a real neat program,” Jones said. “I know people

who need teeth and don’t have any avenues to get them.”

Pam Graham, Auxiliary 5917 President, said dental health is a comprehensive need.

“Poor dental health affects your well-being,” she said. “Not only does it affect you physically, but mentally. A smile helps their self-esteem. All of us like to smile and be smiled at. Spreading happiness is what life is about.”

A damaged smile can really set you back, which is why Smiles for Veterans is so life-altering, Stankewicz said.

“We don’t know what these veterans’ back stories are,” he said. “They changed my life. Having a missing tooth, there’s a stereotype and you may not get hired even when you want to work. You can fall on hard times because of something like that.”

From the VA: Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system and the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA)-eligible beneficiaries can participate in the VA Dental Insurance Program (VADIP), which offers coverage options under two insurance carriers (MetLife and Delta Dental). Participation in the VADIP does not affect veterans’ eligibility for health care treatment. 🌟 AC

Eligible individuals interested in the VADIP can apply by visiting www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vadip or by calling MetLife (1-888-310-1681) and/or Delta Dental (1-855-370-3303).