



Smile INTERVENTION

Swift and subtle, a customized treatment plan can transform a so-so smile into one that is sparkling and exceedingly more appealing.

BY BARBARA PERKINS

Everyone wants a great smile, and this reporter is no exception. Mine was not horrific, but the gap between two teeth seemed to be expanding, a once brilliant shade of white was vanishing, and a prevailing overbite continued to erode my self-confidence.

A complete reboot wasn't necessary—but editing sure would help. So I went searching for a great cosmetic dentist, doing my homework; among other sources I checked the American Academy of Cosmetic Dentistry (AACD) website for listings. My goal was to transform my smile yet maintain my natural look. I was seeking a talented dental practitioner, well trained, board-certified, skilled in state-of-the-art procedures—and hopefully nearby.

Located in Portsmouth, NH, Dr. Richard Y. Liu had all the right stuff: A University of Pennsylvania dental school graduate with three years of specialty training at Harvard University's School of Dental Medicine. His associate professor posts at Harvard and Tufts schools of dental medicine didn't hurt either.

We met for our first consult in Dr. Liu's spiffy new offices, where high-tech machinery fused with friendly associates to create a comforting atmosphere. I read somewhere that office décor is useless in assessing a doctor's talent; however, while sitting in Dr. Liu's waiting room, skimming Opera News and Architectural Digest, I questioned the accuracy of that wisdom. The diplomas on the walls were

Photo Credit: Tommy Chung

reassuring enough, but what caught my eye was the artwork. Dr. Liu's personally drawn renderings of Harvard Yard were impressive. An artistic dentist with a good eye—count me in!

I gave the Cliff Notes version of my dental history while Dr. Liu listened intently. He followed with a focused, "What is it that you dislike about your smile?" I launched into a diatribe about whiter teeth, about esthetically resolving—i.e. improving—the gap on the left side (where I was starting to believe I was missing a tooth), and, of course, about my nemesis—the overbite.

With all these issues in mind, I was prepared for a commitment to months of visits. Dr. Liu left me with the impression that the transformation might require much less. Dental x-rays and a teeth cleaning came next, and we scheduled a second appointment for "the talk."

A prosthodontist, Dr. Liu's forte is restoration dentistry, a cosmetic specialty that masters the nuances of teeth and their placement. Taking into consideration the appearance, color, length and shape of each tooth, Dr. Liu created a customized plan for me: Four solutions to deal with overbite, spacing, fillings and color.

BRACE YOURSELF

For some patients with an overbite, braces are the way to go, and I was prepared to hit that road. After all, the newest braces are practically transparent, not like the old steel contraptions. To my surprise and delight, Dr. Liu recommended something much simpler, quicker and more effective: Using special reshaping tools, uneven teeth can be edited. It's just a matter of measuring and then optimizing the length and width of your teeth so the smile appears holistically balanced.

After making his calculations, Dr. Liu used a diamond tip drill and delicately scaled my incisors down in length to balance with the neighboring teeth. Precision is paramount in reshaping the front teeth, but it still took just five minutes, with no pain, no sedation, and no downtime. The results

were instantaneous and phenomenal.

MIND THE GAP

Gaps in your smile can be realigned to compensate for missing or poorly spaced teeth. For years I was under the impression that the gap between two of my teeth was gradually increasing.

However, when Dr. Liu examined the mold from some old bleaching trays I brought in (created 12 years prior) he discovered that the gap had not increased at all. The gap had morphed only in my imagination. His recommendation, and one we instantaneously applied, was a very effective, Tony Soprano-ish, 'Forget-about it.'

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My next concern was a tooth that was deteriorating quickly, thanks to aging metal fillings. When that happens, teeth can be re-filled with natural, tooth-colored composites. In my case the tooth was too far-gone, and a crown would be necessary.

In the past, such a procedure would require a temporary crown, materials to be sent out to a lab, and a handful of visits spread over weeks. With today's technology it can all be done in one visit. Dr. Liu employed a CAD (Computer Assisted Design) system called CEREC, which used a software program to design a porcelain crown that he could edit for dimension and space, and then fabricate. The 3D computer tool was 'intuitive to use,' according to Dr. Liu, like any good program.

At this point color accuracy was key.

Virtually any dentist can drill and cut, but when it comes to precisely matching a color and lining a tooth up, a well-trained dentist with an artistic eye certainly helps!

WHITE ON

With my teeth now aligned, shaped and manicured, next up was the most outwardly visible manifestation of a great smile, the whiteness factor. An in-office whitening treatment offers dramatic results: Six shades lighter in about an hour. Because Dr. Liu thought my teeth were not far off the white mark, he recommended a more gradual home bleaching process, once a day for an hour with visible results in two weeks. So he took impressions of my upper and lower teeth and made a mold customized to fit my new mouth.

Our final appointment was a quick visit to pick-up the whitening kit and get a basic lesson in how to fill, position and care for the trays. Dr. Liu was adamant with his final words of advice: Stay committed. "Do the full two weeks," he said. "You'll get great results!" Plus I'd always have the trays for touch ups.

He was right. My smile transformation was complete in less than four weeks. To conclude the assignment, I had just one more task: to stop into Dr. Liu's office for a compulsory final photo. In the picture, of course, I was smiling. ☺

OLD YOU



NEW YOU



The patient before and after teeth reshaping, a crown and teeth whitening.

Before and after courtesy of Dr. Richard Liu