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Hey, braceface. It's all worth it

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The pain of braces is worth it in the end – illustration by Adam Zyglis

The word braces can have several different meanings, but to teenagers there's only one that comes to mind. That one thought involves countless trips to an antiseptic-smelling orthodontic office and too much time spent sitting in a chair with your mouth pried open by gloved fingers. But, as the saying goes, pain is beauty, and so many teenagers can relate.

Lauren Wing, a freshman at Gowanda High School, already has a bite plate in her mouth in preparation for the braces that will soon invade her mouth.

"I want them because I want my smile to be straighter," she said.

When asked what her biggest concerns were for her upcoming battle with braces, Lauren said, "When your food gets stuck in your teeth and you have to ask your friends, 'Is it OK? Is there anything in there?'"

She also expressed concern over what colors she'll sport on her braces and wants them to match her outfits.

Braces can be a painful experience. Even the time before braces can be unexpectedly painful. For those of you who have already been through the experience, remember when your orthodontist tortured you by inserting rubber bands between your teeth to widen the spaces? Or maybe you even endured the devil that is the expander (a device designed to increase the size of your palate by being cranked at night and, on top of that, is notorious for catching every bit of food you eat). Little did you know that that was just the beginning.

Next came the real thing. At your next appointment, it seemed like you spent an eternity in that comfortable -- yet extremely uncomfortable -- chair. The hygienist cemented tiny little metal braces onto your teeth one by one until every tooth -- top and bottom -- was covered. For a few weeks, you went around smiling with just the braces on and no wire to be found. You looked like a painting that wasn't quite finished.

At your next appointment, a wire was inserted and threaded through the hole of every brace. It poked the inside of your cheek until it was raw. This visit completed your mouth-full-of-metal look and made it almost impossible for you to floss without a special flossing tool. It took a while to get used to feeling like you have metal teeth gnawing and catching onto the inside of your cheek, but you grow accustomed to it. After a few months, you hardly even remember they're there.

Only when you return to the torture chamber are you reminded that you still sport metal on your teeth. You learn that when people say they've had their braces tightened that they really had a newer and thicker wire inserted and the old one was tossed. You quickly learn to take some sort of painkiller before even entering that antiseptic place.

Devon Sprague completed high school without having any metal cemented to his teeth. It wasn't until he was a little older that the need for braces became apparent. "When I was younger, my dentist told me I didn't need them, but that I had a permanently rooted baby tooth with an adult tooth sitting above it," he said. "At age 18, when I started losing a tooth, I didn't have much of a choice!"

Sprague started his journey into college and adulthood sporting the look most teenagers portray entering high school.

"I believe I got them when I was 19," said Sprague. "I'll be 21 in a month and I have about eight months to go, so it seems like forever that I've had them, but it hasn't been abnormally long. I just started late.

"I got lots of confused looks when people first saw me with them," he said.

A year and a half later, you've posed for two school pictures wearing the braces (assuming you're still in high school) and may or may not have received your first kiss with them on. Rubber bands from your top row of teeth to the bottom row have come and gone and you've endured countless mornings of waking up with a mouth full of them. You've had every single color imaginable attached to your braces and are growing tired of the color selection. You decide to go with silver instead and never return to the colors.

"In the beginning of treatment, they're uncomfortable and hard to keep clean and there are different kinds of hassles day to day," said Dr. Victor A. Bochacki, who practices orthodontics in Springville with his partner, Dr. Paul J. Ziarnowski. Both doctors also teach at the University at Buffalo, where Bochacki is a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Pediatric and Community Dentistry. Ziarnowski teaches as a clinical assistant professor in the Department of Orthodontics.

To their patients in Springville, they're simply known as Dr. B and Dr. Z.

"In the middle of treatment, you get used to it," Bochacki said. "Getting down to it at the end you can see the improvement and complaints change to 'when do I get these off?'"

When you do have your braces removed, it's a glorious day (minus the painful-sounding scraping of the cement, which is actually painless) and you cannot stop smiling. The only thing raining on your parade is the fact that you have to wear retainers 24/7 for two months. All along, you've loved to hate the braces on your teeth. Now every time you smile at your reflection, you hate to love the grueling process you went through.

Tia Sprague, Devon's younger sister and a junior at Gowanda, got her braces off in August after wearing them for three years and two months.

"My gums felt ginormous -- that's what they felt like," said Tia.

She now wears plastic retainers 24/7. This year's school picture is a big one for Tia. After years of sporting the closed-lips smile, "I'm gonna smile for the first time with teeth," she said.

Tia now joins her other brother, Damen, in the post-braces club. What was a sweet beginning for Tia became a bitter ending for her oldest brother.

"It was a little bit frustrating," said Devon Sprague. "Going to the orthodontist functioned almost as a sort of brother-sister bonding time. It was a regularly occurring family ritual."

With both of his younger siblings now out of braces, Devon is the only one left heading out to Bochacki and Ziarnowski's office for appointments.

"Now I'm the 'last man standing' and it's a less enjoyable process to go get my wires tightened," he said.

Many patients wearing braces fail to take care of their teeth and don't do the "homework" their orthodontist assigns them.

"Most people are able to keep things clean and braces are becoming small enough that they don't trap as much food," said Bochacki. "Not wearing the rubber bands like they're supposed to is a problem -- 24/7 turns to five hours a day. If you don't keep things clean you could end up with irreversible problems. If you don't wear your rubber bands, things will take longer."

"It's frustrating when you hold up your end of the bargain and they [the patient] don't come through with theirs," said Ziarnowski. "But you also have to remember we're catching kids at probably one of the most complicated times in their lives. We're catching kids when hormones are kicking in; we're catching kids when there are problems at home."

Braces can be painful, hard to take care of and expensive for parents. It's when you run your tongue over your teeth for the first time after your braces have been removed that you know it was all worth it.

Emily Steves is a senior at Gowanda High School.