

Dentist fills life with 'Platinum Rule'

The day Buzz Waterston went into the Navy, his wife went into the hospital. Five months later, she gave birth to two "half-dead babies," boys who were 5 1/2 weeks premature.

They spent the first days of their lives in neonatal intensive care, hooked to machines and monitors. Says Waterston: "We didn't name them for a week; we were afraid we'd lose them."

Today, one of those boys, Josh, is about to finish law school. The other, Jesse, who has struggled with diabetes, ADD and Tourette's syndrome, is a junior at Widener University, studying computer science.

Waterston, 50, is a dentist who lives and practices in Wallingford, Delaware County. Low-key, soft-spoken, pleasant and cheerful, he's the type of guy who views life as a glass that's always three-quarters full. It takes some probing and prodding, but after a while he'll admit it: It wasn't easy.

There were developmental problems, behavioral problems and, of course, medical problems. One crisis after another, sometimes several at once. At one point, doctor and hospital bills ate up one-third of the family's income. Jesse had to be sent away to a special boarding school, which cost about as much as

a private college.

If it hadn't been for the support of devoted friends and such diversions as fishing, woodworking and singing (Waterston is a regular at the piano bar at Downey's, at Front and South), Waterston might have veered perilously close to a crack-up, despite his outward optimism and unflappable bonhomie.

It helped, of course, that throughout their troubles, Waterston and his wife, Wendy, managed to keep things in perspective. When the boys were infants and Waterston took them to Children's Hospital, for instance, he saw children of 2 and 3 with no hair, the badge of their battle with terminal cancer.

Those bald heads and brave little faces must have made an impression. For now, Waterston has joined other dentists around the country in a novel campaign to raise money for St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Located in Memphis, St. Jude Hospital is dedicated to finding cures for such diseases as cancer, AIDS and sickle-cell anemia. In terms of patients seen and helped, it's the largest childhood-cancer research center in the United States. Since its 1962 founding by actor Danny Thomas, more than 15,000 children from across the land and around the world have been treated.

The cost: nothing. No family is ever asked to pay, and the hospital also foots the bills for transportation, food and lodging.

St. Jude also has made great strides in research toward a cure. When it opened, the survival rate for the most common type of childhood cancer, a form of leukemia, was 4 percent. Now, 80 percent of those children go on to live full lives.

Last year, a dentist in San Diego, wowed by the hospital's good works, hatched an idea. He enlisted the Crown Council, an organization of more than 700 dentists with a bent toward community service. To raise money for St. Jude, they launched a tooth-whitening campaign. In exchange for getting your ivories brightened, you make a donation to the hospital. They called the campaign "Smiles for Life." The initial goal: \$1 million. The final tally: \$1.5 million.

Waterston took part eagerly. He's the type who goes the Golden Rule one better by trying to follow the "Platinum Rule": "Do unto others as they would prefer to have done to themselves." A while back, in his woodworking shop, he crafted a box with a slot on top. Every time he finds a penny, he drops it, plus a

dollar, into the box. If he finds a nickel, in it goes, along with \$5. A dime garners a 10-spot, etc. When the box is full, he donates the money to charity.

A member of Beth Israel, a Reconstructionist congregation in Middletown, he adheres to the Jewish tradition of social concern. In Hebrew, there's a phrase — *tikkun olam* — "repair the world."

"You throw a pebble, and the ripples form ever-widening circles," Waterston explains. "The first circle is the self. Before you can help others, you must first repair yourself. The next circle is the family. And then comes the circle of community."

Tending to all three circles makes you a fuller person, says Waterston, and also helps balance the hassles in life.

For 40-some years, Waterston had worked diligently on the two inner circles, but now, with his children on track and, as he puts it, "with one foot in the real world," he felt able to work on the third circle. "I realized that I have only a few years left

to make a difference."

Smiles for Life works like this: Waterston and other participating dentists will brighten your teeth for free. All you have to do is write a check (or make a donation via credit card) to Smiles for Life for \$150 and up (the minimum contribution is set by each participating dentist; normally, teeth whitening costs at least \$350). Since the whitening materials are donated and the dentists pay administrative costs out of their own pockets, every cent of each donation goes directly to St. Jude, says Waterston. This year's goal: \$3 million.

Cynics might wonder: Is this just a scheme to recruit new patients? Replies Waterston: "If this leads to community goodwill and my practice becoming better-known, that's great. But if I don't get a single new patient and my office provides \$4,000 for St. Jude Hospital, I'll be delighted."

It is, he thinks, an exciting win-win proposition. "People get whiter teeth, which makes them feel good about themselves, and I get to do something to help kids live longer, happier lives."



Art Carey
This Life

For More Information call Buzz Waterston at 610-874-6337 or Smiles for Life at 1-877-476-4537.