



## Restoring Dignity Through Dental Care

Toronto oral surgeon Dr. Tina Meisami honours her late brother through Restoring Smiles, a program that provides free dental care to women who have suffered abuse



Above: Dr. Renu Varshney

Left to right (front row): Ms. Simone Taffe, Administrative Director; Dr. Tina Meisami; Dr. Yasmin Mawji. Back row: Dr. Amelia Deliakis; Dr. Maureen Fenn and Dr. Shiva Shadmand.

When Dr. Tina Meisami's brother died at age 40, she lost not only a sibling, but also the man who was her biggest supporter as she entered the profession of dentistry. Her brother, Dr. Bornha Meisami, was an orthopedic surgeon and someone who cared deeply about social issues, in particular violence against women. So when

Tina Meisami launched a non-profit organization in her brother's honour, choosing the focus of its work was an easy decision. Through Restoring Smiles, the Dr. Bornha Meisami Commemorative Foundation provides free dental care to women across the Greater Toronto Area who have escaped abusive situations and are in the process of rebuilding their lives.

"I wanted to set up something in his honour that would embody our relationship and in a small way provide that reassuring, that comforting support that I had from him," says Dr. Meisami, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon, who practises in Toronto. "I wanted to give that to other women who maybe never had it in their lives."

The program's mandate is to provide dental treatment to patients referred by staff at women's shelters, in order to eliminate pain, restore function and speech, and help alleviate some of the emotional trauma that patients have experienced. Most of these women have little to no dental coverage and may have been neglecting their own health for some time, Dr. Meisami says.

One such woman is Nasim, whose last name is being withheld to protect her privacy. In 2012, Nasim fled an abusive relationship and was living at a shelter when she sought care due to two missing teeth. They had been knocked out in 2009 in Iran, when she was beaten by two policemen while protesting the results of that year's Iranian election. She was forced to flee Iran before she could obtain adequate care, and could not find a dentist who would treat her when she arrived in Canada four years ago.

Along with the other traumas that Nasim experienced were those missing teeth. "I lost my confidence, I lost everything," Nasim says. "I didn't want to be in a relationship with anyone. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want to go anywhere because I didn't have the confidence to talk."

When the shelter finally referred Nasim to dental surgeon Dr. Maureen Fenn, one of the program's original members, she jumped at the opportunity. "[Dr. Fenn] took a look at my teeth and she looked at me and said, 'You just hit the jackpot,'" Nasim says. "And I looked at her and said, 'Why?' And she said, 'We're going to take care of everything here and you don't have to pay a penny.' I remember I started crying. I couldn't believe it."

During three years of treatment, Nasim was given root canals, had cavities filled, a tooth extracted, and other work. "I gained back my self-confidence. I am a very, very happy person. I'm not afraid to show my teeth," Nasim says.

Before launching the foundation, Dr. Meisami approached four friends and former dental school classmates about joining her. They all said yes immediately. Dental surgeon Dr. Renu Varshney was happy to help Dr. Meisami pay tribute to her brother, and to use her own professional skills to help a segment of the population desperately in need of care. "I'd grown up in an environment where you help others who are less fortunate," Dr. Varshney says. "So when she came to us with this, it really resonated with me."

It took a while for the dentists to establish the trust of local shelters, which work hard to ensure the privacy and safety of women who have fled dangerous circumstances. The dentists have a relationship with only five out of 45 shelters across the GTA that serve women, "so you can imagine the growth potential there," says Dr. Meisami.

Since 2010, the program has provided more than 30 women with more than \$150,000 in services.


The program receives in-kind donations from suppliers, including implants from Nobel Biocare. Otherwise, the dentists cover the costs of their services and provide their own staff and supplies.

The number of professionals involved has grown to include more than 15 dentists, surgeons, hygienists and other practitioners across the GTA, and one in Ottawa. But Dr. Meisami would like to see the program expand across the country.

Last summer, the foundation received a \$50,000 community grant from Green Shield Canada, money that will go towards expanding the program's reach and hiring an administrator to conduct outreach and track patients, some of whom move on from the shelters without leaving an address or phone number. The program needs to be able to track patients better, so practitioners can attend to patients' complex care over months or even years.

Ultimately, for Dr. Varshney, the work is rewarding. The patients suffer from anxiety, depression and a lack of self-

confidence when they step into her office. But having their teeth fixed and their smiles restored can be transforming, she says. "We provide the treatment with the hope that perhaps, if they are able to get a little bit of confidence, this can translate to how they function in the future with their relationships and jobs and in the community, as well," Dr. Varshney says.

Dr. Meisami notes that about 90 percent of patients who have been helped by Restoring Smiles no longer live in shelters by the time their treatment is completed. "It's so lovely to see that they've moved on, they've put things behind them, some of the emotional scars perhaps have healed, they start taking care of themselves in other ways," Dr. Meisami says. "It's a whole transformation that's so beautiful to see and to watch." 

*Andrea Janus is a Toronto-based writer and editor whose work has most recently appeared at CTVNews.ca, the Toronto Star and The Kit.*

### Get Involved!

Dr. Meisami says the foundation is seeking more volunteers, male and female, from across the GTA and the country. "If we have volunteers," she says, "we can set them up. We also need to have a central dental clinic that we can call our home, in order to make things easier for our patients and easier for our doctors to provide a multi-disciplinary dental treatment."

Please call Dr. Meisami at 416-923-2100 for more information and to volunteer.

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Wellness Support Services

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