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POPULAR URGENT

Hammond woman thanks surgeon, lab for saving son's smile

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Creative Technics Dental Laboratory owner John Canham, center, visits with patient Josiah Ridley, right, and his mother in Highland. Canham organized a group of doctors and dentists that provided free dental reconstruction for Josiah, who was in a traumatic car crash about three years ago.

Jonathan Miano, The Times

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HIGHLAND | Esmeralda Ridley was crying desperate tears and pleading for help for her badly injured son the first time she met John Canham.

The Hammond woman had lost her job and savings. She had no money for food and was sleeping in her car in the parking lot of the hospital where her only child, Josiah Ridley, was recovering from a traumatic car accident.

Josiah was 19 when he crashed his car into a trailer on Calumet Avenue in Hammond on June 28, 2010. The impact left him in a coma for three months with two broken knees, a broken collarbone, a broken jaw, four missing upper teeth, seven missing lower teeth and pneumonia.

On the recommendation of a distant mutual friend, Esmeralda Ridley went knocking on the door of Canham's business, Creative Technics Dental Laboratory in Highland, pleading for help.

"They were just writing him off," Canham said. "They were addressing his survival issues and didn't worry about his mouth or his face. ... Without front teeth, he had no self-confidence whatsoever."

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Canham contacted Dr. Eric Pulver, an oral and maxillofacial surgeon with an office next door to Canham's lab, and asked if he could help.

Pulver diagnosed Josiah and put together a treatment plan, free of charge. Dr. Jeff Bona, a Valparaiso dentist, also offered his services at no cost.

Dr. Anthony Puntillo, an orthodontist with several offices in the region, donated CT scanning needed for the procedures.

Canham then contacted an implant company, Staurman, and told Josiah's story. The company agreed to donate the implants that Canham's lab customized and a removable appliance.

Pulver prescribed antibiotics and other medications Josiah was to take before the surgery. But on the morning of the surgery, Esmeralda didn't have the money to get the medications. Canham paid for them himself.

On the way to the doctor's office with Josiah for the surgery, Esmeralda's car got a flat tire. Canham picked her and Josiah up and changed the tire.

Pulver then performed the surgery, free of charge.

Canham hadn't seen Josiah, now 22, since his lower teeth were restored until he and his mother came to the dental lab Friday to thank him for all of his efforts in coordinating his dental reconstruction.

"Wow! Look at this guy with a tie on and everything!" Canham said when he saw Josiah. "Let's see those teeth."

"They're perfect," Josiah said.

Esmeralda said they wanted to thank Canham before Father's Day.

"A father is a person who takes care of children without even thinking twice about themselves," she said. "He's a father. He's a good man with a good heart."

Esmeralda and Josiah paid a visit to Pulver on Friday as well.

"Look at you! You look great!" Pulver said when he saw Josiah.

Pulver credited Canham with organizing efforts for Josiah's dental reconstruction.

"He was really motivated to get this done," he said. "You sometimes take for granted your teeth and how they make you feel. You go to work to help people and do your thing and sometimes you take for granted the impact it can have on a family and a life."

Canham agreed.

"It's rewarding for all of us," he said. "You get all wound up in the business and the money side of things, but this is what's really important."

Esmeralda is still looking for work and is renting a home in Hammond with water damage in the living room.

But she doesn't feel sorry for herself or complain. After leaving the visits with Canham and Pulver on Friday morning, she and Josiah planned to volunteer to feed the hungry as they do every week.

"That's life," she said. "It's hard, life is hard. I have no family here, only my son and God. That is truly enough."

Josiah said the surgery has changed his outlook on life and feelings about himself.

"Now I actually believe I'm worth something," he said. "I believe in myself. I have something to live for."
