

McLean CONNECTION

Enjoyable Dentist Visit? Some Say So Year-old, all-female McLean practice takes friendly approach.

By Mike DiCicco

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Bob Fifer said he had found a dental practice in McLean that made a trip to the dentist "something you actually look forward to and enjoy."

At the office of Mary Gharagozloo, who opened her own dental practice about a year ago, patients watch episodes of popular TV shows while getting their teeth cleaned, the Great Falls resident reported. If interested, they are treated to a paraffin hand wax during treatment. The chairs give a gentle massage.

"WHEN I WAS a kid, I had all my cavities filled and learned to hate the dentist, and 20 years later I got root canals and learned to hate the dentist," said Fifer. He said he was now unlearning that aversion. The charm of Gharagozloo's office, he said, was in the "layers and layers of little gizmos and fun stuff they do, but most of all, it's the manners."

On his first visit, he said, Gharagozloo had spent about 15 minutes chatting and getting to know him. The four women who operate the office schedule time between appointments so that clients do not have to wait, and after the first appointment, the patient can expect a gift basket and a phone call.

Fifer said this sort of treatment is rare, and he ought to know, as the CEO of a management consulting firm and author of two books on business management. "Most companies don't know how to treat customers right, and doctors are notoriously awful," he said.

His four children are now angry at him for ever having sent them to an office other than Gharagozloo's, where his 15-year-old son watches sports or "The Office" during checkups and where his 13-year-old daughter discovered the iPod, Fifer said. "I'll be watching 'Friends' or 'Sex in the City,' and when they're done with me halfway through the third episode, I'm kind of annoyed that I have to go."

A visit to the office on Elm Street found Purcellville resident Kelly Griel with plastic bags on her waxed hands, watching "CSI" during her treatment. A wireless headset allowed her to hear the show. Griel works in Tysons Corner but on this occasion had to make the long trip from her home just for the appointment. "It's a combination of a dentist-spa appointment," she said as she checked out.

It was only her second visit, but she had been scheduling appointments at the office for her boss for some time. "They're very accommodating as to what fits his schedule," she said, adding that she also had never heard someone expound on a trip to the dentist the way her boss did. "They're very friendly, very interested in your overall well-being," Griel said. She is about to quit smoking, and the office's staff had offered to assist in any way possible.



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While Dr. Mary Gharagozloo examines his teeth, McLean resident Denny Houston watches television on an overhead screen.

DENTAL HYGIENIST Honi-Jo Mathis said she might be able to help by prescribing a quitting aid or perhaps educating a patient on the dangers of smoking if the patient were interested. Griel, however, had asked that they help by not lecturing her. Mathis said she thought people got lectured in the dental chair too often.

Also in the interest of overall well-being, each patient gets a quick blood pressure screening, simply because most people visit their dentist more often than their doctor, said Mathis.

In the waiting room, a small refrigerator built into a table in the corner held bottled water. On the table were floral arrangements and a tray of Hershey's Kisses. The magazines were up-to-date.

Gharagozloo swooped into the room to greet Denny Houston, who has been a patient since 2001, when Gharagozloo and two of the office's other staffers worked at another practice. "How are the boys?" she asked, inquiring whether one of Houston's sons was finished with medical school.

"I've been around the world and I can say Dr. G. is the best dentist I've seen," Houston said after his appointment. In his travels as a chemical engineer for Exxon-Mobil, the McLean resident has been to other dentists in Europe, Asia and the U.S., and he said a combination of cutting-edge technology, technical skill and care for patients made Gharagozloo's office stand out. "I think she really cares about her patients," said Houston. "And it's not just Dr. G. It's the whole staff." He said he hoped his son would take a cue from Gharagozloo after he was finished with school.

Among the office's technological novelties are a digital X-ray that minimizes X-ray exposure, foot-operated cupboard doors in the sterilization room to keep all hands clean and a VELScope oral cancer screener. Gharagozloo said she had picked up the latter after customers who had seen it on the news requested it.

Bruce Wilson of Vienna said he still wasn't sure if he would call his time in the dentist's chair "fun," but he said he had "no trepidation in showing up. They're very personable. They make you feel at home." Wilson was another patient who had followed Gharagozloo from her previous practice because, he said, he found her and her team to be "professional, thorough and concerned with getting it right."

"They've got all the latest technology," he said. "It makes you feel like they keep up to date." He has recommended the office to friends.

Mathis said the friendly atmosphere is also shared among staffers. "She sees everybody as her associate," she said of Gharagozloo.

Office administrator Monica Hopkins said the entire team had helped to design the office and that everyone was consulted on decisions.

"WHEN I TALK to other people in the dental field, they don't have that relationship with their boss," said Mathis. She added that Gharagozloo wanted her staff to be as educated as she was. The group had just returned from a team-building seminar in Chicago, and Mathis said the company would soon send her to dental hygiene academy.

"I don't like that word, 'staff.' I think it's degrading," said Gharagozloo. She said she had decided on an all-female office in part because she thought this would lend the practice a soft touch and a nurturing environment. "I didn't know how much fun it would be," she said.

She had wanted to create a dentist's office that did not inspire fear, but rather was

welcoming. "I always hear about people hating to go to the dentist. I never had that experience because my dad was my dentist." Her grandfather also was a dentist. But Gharagozloo had not always intended to follow in their footsteps. She first worked as a nurse in pediatric intensive care and then as a physician's assistant in the open-heart surgery room of the Mayo Clinic. "Then I decided to go to dental school at the age of 33," she said.

While the knowledge she gained about the human body during her previous work has been helpful, she said, her experience of comforting patients and their families has proven to be especially useful.

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