

The Ninja Dentist Reveals Her Training Ground

By Kyle Patton, Associate Editor, *Dentaltown Magazine*



As a dentist, you spend most of your time at your practice. It's understandable that you might not get many opportunities to see what it's like in another doctor's office. That's why we bring you an "office visit" six times a year. It's a chance for you to meet your peers, see their practices and hear their stories. This month we caught up with Dr. Desirée Walker, a North Carolina native who balances being a full-time dentist with competing on the hit television show, "American Ninja Warrior." You won't want to miss how this doc has transformed her office into a ninja training ground.

What was the path you took to becoming a dentist?

Dr. Walker: I grew up in a small rural town in North Carolina. I thought going to the dentist was cool and viewed it like a mini field trip to an amusement park. I was just fascinated by the experience: the chairs that went up and down with all the gadgets, the bowl I got to spit in, the nice lady who cleaned my teeth and then gave me a toy and toothbrush.

Growing up, I never realized that so many people were scared of—or dreaded—going to see the dentist. I was always happy to see mine. He was a nice older man—like a granddad—who wore plaid bell-bottoms and told me I had a nice smile. My positive experiences at the dentist as a patient made me curious about dentistry as a career.

I actually invented a piece of dental equipment when I was 8 years old. My friend had a loose baby tooth that would not come out. We were both gymnasts and I had an indoor pull-up bar, on which we spent hours practicing. I came up with an ingenious plan that she willingly agreed to—I have no clue why. I had her stand on a chair placed right under the pull-up bar. I tied a short piece of

OFFICE HIGHLIGHTS

Name: Desirée Walker, DDS

Practice Name: Lumber River Dental

Graduated From: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Dentistry

Practice Location: Lumberton, North Carolina

Practice Size: 3000 sq. ft., averaging 70 new patients each month, approximately 1,200 active patients.

Staff: Two hygienists, two front desk coordinators, two dental assistants. My husband, Ash, helps with office management and human resources.

Web site: www.Lumbertondental.com,
www.Facebook.com/lumberriverdental





string around the tooth, and then the other end around the bar. I had her grab the bar and I took away the chair. She was hanging in chin-up position with her tooth tied to the bar.

Soon into the plan she changed her mind, but before she could sputter out the words, “Get the chair,” her arms gave way, she dropped down, and the tooth came out. It was dangling from the string, still attached to the chin-up bar.

I thought it was the coolest thing ever. I had helped my friend with my pull-up-bar tooth extractor. She was a tad stunned and so glad her tooth was out. We went right back to playing on the bar, with the tooth still dangling.

What’s the story behind you going from dentist to gymnast to ... ninja dentist?

Dr. Walker: My official transformation to a “ninja dentist” occurred on a Saturday afternoon while bonding ortho brackets on my husband.

We were in the office alone and I received a call with a Hollywood area code. I do not normally take calls during patient care, but since the call was from Hollywood and the patient was my husband, I quickly de-gloved to see who was on the other end.

It happened to be the producers from the hit NBC television show, “American Ninja Warrior.” They wanted me to compete. I had submitted an application and video months earlier but had forgotten all about it, especially with the demands of a ground-up, start-up practice in its four-month infancy.

My jaw dropped. I had three weeks before I had to travel to Miami to compete on the show. It was the athletic thrill of a lifetime.

Six years earlier, back in dental school, I would never have dreamed about this opportunity. I was not in athletic shape and was suffering from severe chronic back pain. The pain was so severe that I had to wear a specialized back brace daily to get through the rigors of clinic and class. I even had to wear it to get a good night’s sleep.

The pain was debilitating and I had thoughts of dropping out of dental school

TOP PRODUCTS

- **DentalVibe.** If you want to be the master of painless injections, I suggest this product.
- **Nomad.** I could have never designed my operatories with openness the way I did due to regulations with radiology.
- **Flexview.** Terrific system with wireless headphones.
- **Open Dental Software.** Excellent customer service—even on Saturday.
- **Kona Adapter with Isolite Mouthpieces.**

altogether, but instead I decided to change. Instead of trying not to move my body to avoid pain, I began to move again, but differently.

I went back to one of my childhood passions. I returned to gymnastics and joined the club gymnastics team on campus. Most important, I added movement breaks in my day, which included stretching and mobility exercises in between clinic and classes. There was no eureka moment when I became pain-free. It was gradual healing process. Dedication and consistency to my new movement and mobility routine were critical to my becoming pain-free.

At the end of the day I was going home with no pain, and getting stronger. The pain relief not only improved my clinic and



school performance, but also made me want to challenge myself even more, athletically.

I began entering fitness competitions. Within two years, I was a national champion and professional fitness competitor.

I installed gymnastics training equipment in my home—I had rings and rope mounted from the ceiling in my living room, and wall bars and a balance beam in my training room. I competed as a 33-year-old for one season alongside some of the girls I coached. It was a thrill to relive those gymnastics competition days.

I made a huge professional decision to build and open my own dental practice. It was having my own practice that allowed me to integrate movement into my day. I installed rings, stall bars and yoga mats in my private office. I surrounded myself with a constant flow of movement and inspiration that made me feel good. Feeling good allowed me to progress into more complex “ninja” workouts.

Are you a local celebrity with your patients now? How has all the publicity surrounding your television appearance and magazine coverage changed things for you?

Dr. Walker: Being an “American Ninja Warrior” competitor has been a fantastic way to connect with my patients on an emotional and fun level.

It’s something they can talk about with their friends. “Hey, I go see the ninja dentist; you know, the dentist who was on ‘American Ninja Warrior.’” My pediatric patients, especially, are in awe. Many of my patients are followers of the show. Sometimes we watch the show reruns during their visit and, if they are good—and especially if they have no cavities—I give them an interactive tour of my private office, which I have named, “The Secret Ninja Training Room.”

If they like, I let them swing on the rings and climb the wall bars. I make the experience as fun and interactive as possible. I want it to be an amazing memory for them. It is this type of happy ending to a dental visit that is my goal. You know you are doing something right when kids are begging their parents to bring them back to the dentist.

I began entering fitness competitions. Within two years, I was a national champion and professional fitness competitor.

What do you hope other dentists take away from seeing the things you’ve done while still running a practice?

Dr. Walker: Follow your passion. Mine has been dentistry and gymnastics. I love movement and fitness. I never knew they would collide the way they have. I just let the truest version of myself shine and keep following my instincts as to what feels right. You have to do what you love. I believe success can be measured in how you use your talents to help others.

Regarding your practice, how is it laid out? What’s the workflow like?

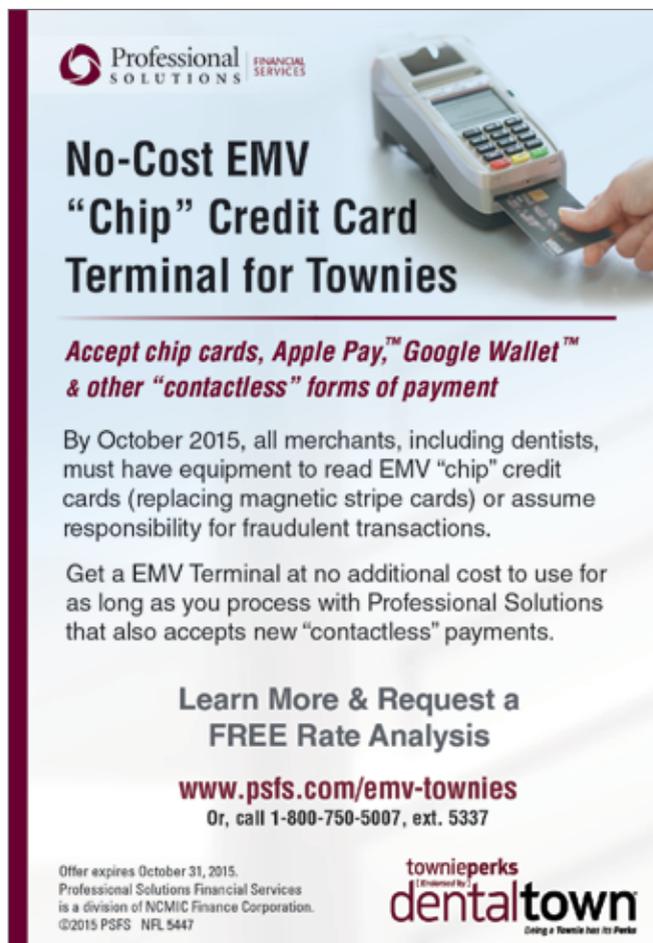
Dr. Walker: When you enter my practice into the reception area, there are two eight-foot wall water features bordered by a live vertical wall garden that has a hidden irrigation system. The sounds of water rushing down the fountains and the smell of things green and growing promote calming.

We have a coffee bar and bottled water, free Wi-Fi, and a kids’ cave with an Xbox and iPad. Our goal at Lumber River Dental is to have patients’ senses heightened by creating a pleasurable and relaxing environment for them.

Getting the patient as comfortable as possible sets the foundation for our workflow. I currently have four operatories outfitted identically (with two more plumbed and ready to be outfitted in the very near future). They can be used for either hygiene or doctor procedures. I love this ambidextrous setup. Patients can be seated anywhere and treated for any procedure in any operatory.

What is your practice philosophy?

Dr. Walker: My main philosophy is to create the best patient experience possible. From the time the patients make their first call or



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email to my office, to the time they step out of their car and enter our reception, I want them to feel that they are special, cared for, appreciated and in the right place to receive state-of-the-art dental treatment.

What are your favorite marketing techniques? How do you get the word out about your practice?

Dr. Walker: Internal marketing. This is something I learned before I opened my practice. Seeing it in action has made me a true believer. One of the favorite parts of my day is calling my patients. I call all my patients the day after they have received anesthesia to ask how they are doing. I want to let them know that I care about them, and also, I learn how to improve my dentistry based on their feedback. This habit is one reason my practice has 70 new patients each month, with less than 2 percent of overhead spent on advertising and marketing.

What do you think is the biggest problem dentists face today?

Dr. Walker: One of the biggest challenges is both running the business of the dental practice and being the clinician. Dental school teaches us how to be dentists. It does not teach us how to run a business. I have invested in business and leadership continuing education to ensure the success of my practice.

My team members are counting on me to lead, and practices struggle when dentists lack leadership skills. Leadership skills parlay into empowering dentists to come together on local, state and national levels to present a cohesive voice against external threats like corporate dentistry and inhibitory regulations.

What is your patient philosophy?

Dr. Walker: We have an acronym that we say in our team huddles:



Why refer out 50 orthodontic patients a year at \$5,500 per case, when you can retain \$275,000 within your practice?

BROCK RONDEAU,
DHS, BDS, DABCO, OAES, DABDM, DAREDM

DR. BROCK RONDEAU HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ORTHODONTISTS SINCE 1988. HE HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ORTHODONTISTS SINCE 1988. HE HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ORTHODONTISTS SINCE 1988. HE HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF ORTHODONTISTS SINCE 1988.



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Sessions

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WBFTP—what's best for the patient? Patients always come first. Sometimes we may have to stay late for a procedure; sometimes patients run late, and we will work them in. We take every opportunity to make them feel special and appreciated.

What is your technique philosophy?

Dr. Walker: I always double-check my work to ensure an excellent finished product. I will redo any procedure with which I am not completely satisfied. I want the patient comfortable, happy and healthy.

What is the greatest advancement or change you have seen during your tenure as a dentist?

Dr. Walker: My tenure is still in its infancy (eight years). The greatest advancement I've seen is in information technology. With information at my fingertips through apps on my phone, I can open any of my patients' charts, consult with clinicians around the world on cases, and perform so much without having to be on-site at the practice. Through interfaces like Dentaltown.com, I am able to consult with the world's leading clinicians.

Looking ahead, what would you like to see dentistry do in terms of the way it operates as a profession in the next five to 10 years?

Dr. Walker: Dental health needs to become cool. As dental professionals, we must find a way to convey the value of oral-health care to our patients. I often have patients who think they don't need care because they are not in pain. Some end up putting off simple things that become more complex and expensive because they're not being proactive. Dentistry is more than just doing procedures. We are not in the dental business. We must remember we are in the people business.

What is your favorite procedure?

Dr. Walker: Extractions with the immediate denture or partial. When you remove pain and infection and can give someone their smile back in the same day, it is very rewarding.

How has Dentaltown helped you in your professional life?

Dr. Walker: My sincere appreciation goes to Dentaltown for the tremendous influence it continues to have on my dental journey. Sandy Pardue and the group at Classic Practice; Dr. Scott Leune with Breakaway Seminars; Dr. Lorne Lavine with The Digital Dentist; and

OTHER PRODUCTS

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- 3M Scotchbond Universal Adhesive
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- Kerr OptiBond Solo Plus

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- Lucid-Lok Brackets—Six Month Smiles
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Burs

- SS White, DENTSPLY Midwest, and Axis Dental

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- Ivoclar Vivadent Variolink Veneer
- Kerr Maxcem Elite

Hygiene

- Philips Sonicare electric toothbrushes
- Philips Sonicare Airfloss
- Embrace WetBond Sealant
- GUM Expanding Floss

Patient Financing

- CareCredit
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Restorative

- Kerr SonicFill system (bulk-fill composite, with Sonic fill handpick)
- Kuraray CLEARFIL MAJESTY Flow
- Kuraray CLEARFIL MAJESTY ES-2
- Ultradent Omni-Matrix - Pedo

- Ultradent V-ring sectional matrix system
- Garrison Sectional Matrix system
- Greater Curve Tofflemire Bands
- Kerr Quikstrips
- 3M Sof-Lex Discs
- Kuraray CLEARFIL MAJESTY Flow
- Kuraray CLEARFIL MAJESTY ES-2
- Ivoclar Vivadent OptraGate or OptraDam
- Kerr Quikstrips
- 3M Sof-Lex Discs

Technology

- XDR digital sensors
- Panoramic Digital Pan System
- Intraoral camera: MD740 USB generic
- Flexview patient overhead viewing monitor system by Impact Media
- Wireless headphones, Bluetooth
- YAPI software allows for full paperless dental office integration, intra-office/messaging communication, automated appointment confirms and recalls, reviews and social media.
- DDS GP Yes! This is a dental app for iPad, used for condition and treatment-plan presentation.
- Kerr SonicFill composite system

Jay Baum with Impact Media are just of the few I have met through Dentaltown, and they have greatly contributed to my dental practice start-up learning and success.

Describe the most successful or rewarding experience in your professional life.

Dr. Walker: Knowing I'm making a positive impact on the lives of others is what drives me. There is no single, massive, most-rewarding experience. What revs me up is knowing that I'm using my talents to help others—that I'm learning, growing and doing what I love. The very special moments are the little things. When you get a thank-you card from a patient, when you over hear other patients telling their friends that you are kind and don't cause pain, and when you hear pedo patients talking about how cool their dentist is. ■