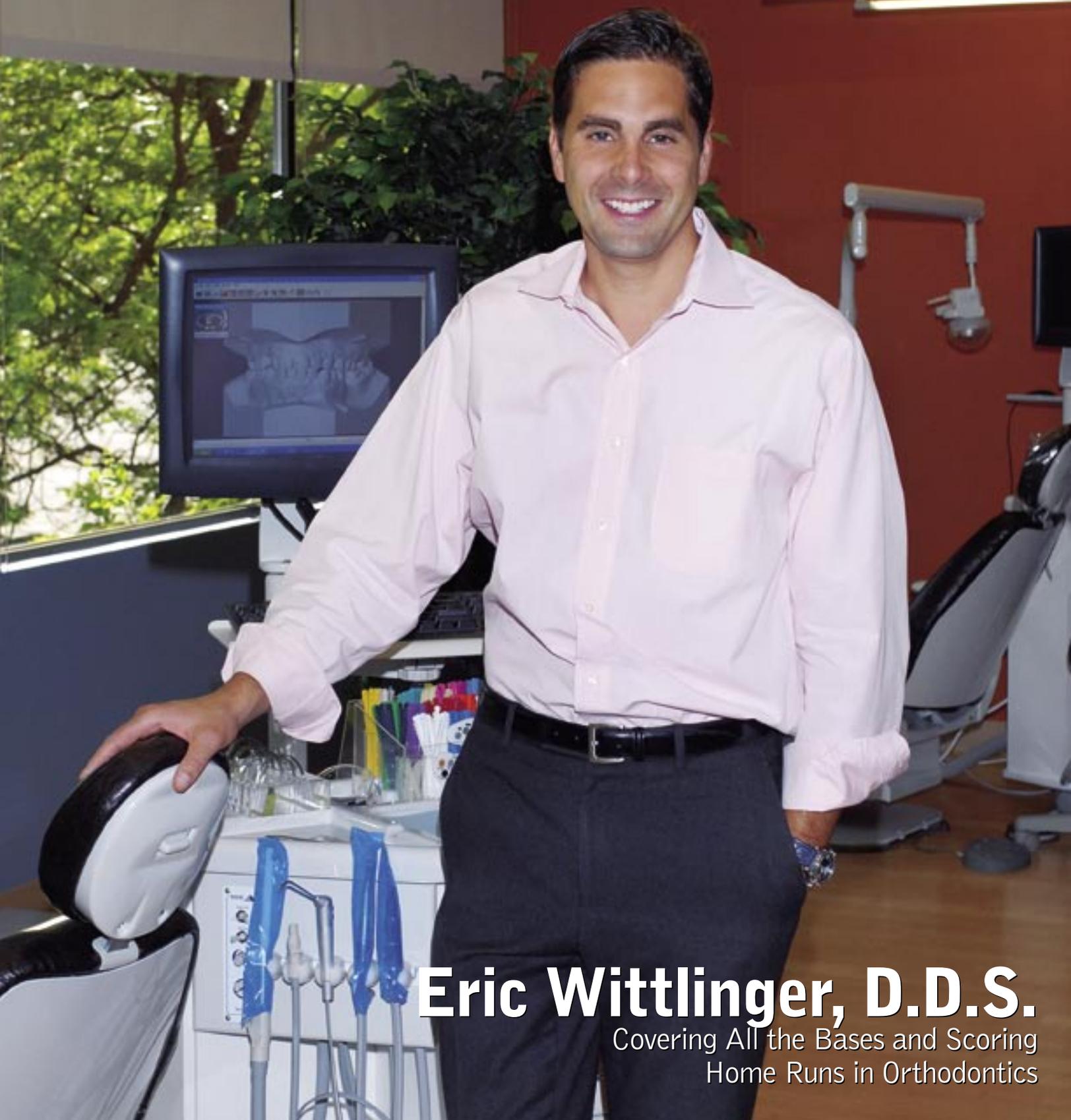


New Jersey Edition

DOCTOR *of* DENTISTRY

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Eric Wittlinger, D.D.S.

Covering All the Bases and Scoring
Home Runs in Orthodontics

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By Julie Jacobs

Log on to Eric Wittlinger, D.D.S.' website and chances are you'll feel like having a hot dog and a soda under the lights at Yankee Stadium, which is all well and good as long as you brush your teeth afterward. A veritable smorgasbord of baseball sights and sounds — complete with pin stripes, the roar of fans and the crack of a bat — the site perfectly embodies who Wittlinger is, both as an enthusiast of America's favorite pastime and an area orthodontist determined to provide his patients with the best care available.

THE LONG ROAD TO DENTISTRY

Born in Dallas, TX, and raised in Upper Saddle River, NJ, Wittlinger took to teeth after a lengthy career in sales. He graduated from the University of Delaware in 1990 with a bachelor's degree in biology and an eye toward the pharmaceutical industry. With no job in sight, he wound up at Thompson Medical Company, a division of

Slim-Fast Foods, selling over-the-counter food and drug products. After three years he shifted to sales for Gibson greeting cards, moving up the ranks as he moved around the United States, from Florida, to Boston, to Washington, DC. "I had the same accounts, just different aisles in the stores," he recalls. "Then I got laid off."

It was during an interview for another sales position with an Evian representative that Wittlinger had an epiphany. "I'd been living all over the country with no roots, and I came to realize that I'd had it with sales," he says. "So I spent some time on the beach in Florida and contemplated my next step."

Three months later he made the decision to use his degree and pursue a career in health care. In preparation for his entrance exams, Wittlinger enrolled in classes at Northern Virginia Community College while waiting tables to reacquaint himself with the core science subjects. He finally decided on dentistry after taking the DAT and

Dr. Wittlinger graduated from the highly competitive orthodontic postgraduate program at New York University (NYU), where he was trained in such state-of-the-art orthodontic techniques as invisible braces, orthodontic implants, orthognathic surgery and digital office technology.





PHOTO BY KEN ALSWANG

Dr. Wittlinger designed the space to create an attractive and open environment using high-tech diagnostic and treatment equipment.

scoring in the 96th percentile in the United States. He applied to 13 dental schools that year, but received no acceptances. Undeterred and still possessing the fortitude that catapulted him in sales, he relocated to Richmond, VA, reapplied the following year, and was accepted into the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) School of Dentistry. He was 30 years old.

“I was so grateful to get in. VCU took a chance on an atypical student, and I was intent on doing well because I didn’t want to have any regrets. Once I set my mind to something, I just do it,” he says.

And do it he did. A model student with noticeable leadership potential, Wittlinger was asked to serve on the Council of Students for the American Dental Education Association (ADEA). He ended up chairing the Council and was soon elected by the students to be on the Board of Directors, the highest position a student can hold in ADEA. He was later commended by the Dean of VCU for outstanding student leadership in academic dentistry, and was awarded the distinction of election into Omicron Kappa Upsilon, the National Dental Honor Society. In 2002, he graduated in the top 10 percent of his class, *magna cum laude*, and received his Doctor of Dental Surgery degree.

Wittlinger chose orthodontics as his specialty because “every case is a puzzle. It’s a thinking discipline with artistic and aesthetic elements,” he says. “Also, you have the chance to establish and build relationships with your patients and their parents. Plus, you can be a big influence on kids with low self-esteem and see how happy they are when their braces are taken off and they show off their beautiful, new smiles.”

Fresh on the heels of dental school, Wittlinger was accepted into

the highly competitive orthodontic postgraduate program at New York University (NYU). There he was trained in such state-of-the-art orthodontic techniques as invisible braces, orthodontic implants, orthognathic surgery and digital office technology. One year into his residency at NYU, he was already planning ahead, designing his stationery and researching practice opportunities. Shortly after earning his Certificate in Orthodontics and Dentofacial Orthopedics in 2004, he was back home in New Jersey, having finally reached his true career destination.

A PLACE IN PATIENT CARE

Ever the go-getter, Wittlinger quickly set about sending letters seeking a position to every orthodontic practice in Bergen County. Of the two responses he received, one was from Dr. Jack Markowitz, a well-regarded orthodontist in Woodcliff Lake who was not yet ready to retire, but had been looking for a suitable candidate to eventually take over his practice. Doc, as he’s affectionately called, was no stranger to Wittlinger. Wittlinger’s brother went to Markowitz for his braces, and Wittlinger himself went through high school with Markowitz’s son, David.

Wittlinger worked for Markowitz for six months before buying the practice in January 2005. His top priority since then has been to provide his patients with the highest quality orthodontic care using the most up-to-date technologies in the industry. Problems resulting from crowded, crooked or protruding teeth and crossbites and overbites are solved through such means as traditional metal braces,

Dr. Wittlinger enjoys the artistic and aesthetic elements of orthodontics and the opportunity to establish relationships with his patients and to improve their self-esteem through orthodontic care.



invisible ceramic braces and the Invisalign system, along with digital imaging and advanced computer graphics.

“Orthodontics has advanced remarkably over the past 20 years, with better results in less time,” he points out. “The new techniques and appliances that we use greatly reduce discomfort levels, decrease the frequency of visits and offer several treatment options from which to choose.”

At Wittlinger’s practice, braces are not just for kids. Approximately 20 percent of his patients are adults who can benefit from Invisalign’s transparent aligners and other clear braces as well. “Tooth alignment can be changed at any age if your gums and bone structure are healthy.”

Jaw alignment, too, can be altered. Wittlinger works closely with oral surgeons in preparing patients for orthognathic surgery, an interdisciplinary procedure that corrects abnormalities of facial bones in the jaw that can adversely affect chewing, talking and even self-esteem. Using braces as anchors, he aligns the teeth in such a manner as to enable the oral surgeon to perform the procedure to optimal effect. The process involves the application of digital imaging technology to computerize treatment planning, so patients can get a general idea of how they’ll look soon after surgery.

“We also place and use temporary orthodontic anchorage devices as an adjunct to traditional orthodontics,” Wittlinger notes. “They’re relatively new, so a lot of orthodontists don’t use them yet. They’re basically small temporary pins that allow for absolute anchorage when moving teeth in certain situations.”

Whether it’s for traditional orthodontics, interceptive early treatment or orthognathic surgery, Wittlinger provides all of his patients with the personal, individualized attention he so strongly feels they deserve. After initial X-rays have been taken and records have been evaluated, he holds a private treatment consultation to explain his clinical diagnosis and proposed treatment in detail as well as review goals and estimated fees.

OFFICE AESTHETICS

Wittlinger is a member of numerous professional organizations: the American Association of Orthodontists, American Dental Association, American Board of Orthodontics, New Jersey Dental Association and Bergen County Dental Society among them. He also is the current Treasurer/Secretary of the New Jersey Association of Orthodontists. As he has continually sought to enhance his professional standing, so too has he simultaneously worked to refine his office environment for patients and staff alike.

After taking over the practice from Markowitz, he immediately began a major upgrade of the office. He gutted it all the way down to the rafters and expanded into an adjoining vacant space, increasing the square footage from 980 to 2,200. In addition, he brought in high-tech diagnostic and treatment equipment.

“The office was small with old technology. It just made sense to me to move into the 21st century and provide patients in my community with a nice, state-of-the-art, contemporary office,” he says.



PHOTO BY KEN ALSWANG

Dr. Wittlinger is passionate about baseball; he distributes real admission tickets as first appointment cards and posts pictures of his patients on baseball cards on the office bulletin board when their braces come off.

Despite being crammed into crowded, confined and dusty quarters during the renovation, not to mention having to make countless trips down the stairs to another dental office where Wittlinger was borrowing a chair to see existing patients, his employees were, by his own words, “real troopers.”

“We’re a lean and mean staff of five. They stuck with me through all the construction and now they love the new office,” he adds, offering that camaraderie, teamwork and morale are fostered regularly through group attendance at dental meetings, dinners out together and year-end bonuses.

Green is the color of choice for Wittlinger’s office, metaphorically speaking. He has made it one of his goals to make the space as environmentally friendly as possible. Toward this end, new software systems have been implemented to dispose of paper charts and reduce the need for paper overall. Digital record-keeping has eliminated the chemicals and waste associated with film processing, while also decreasing patients’ exposure to radiation by up to 90 percent and enabling easier sharing of patient information among dental professionals. State-of-the-art sterilization equipment uses steamed heat rather than chemicals to destroy contaminants on dental instruments, and the dental practice chairs contain self-contained water units with purified distilled water. Wittlinger also incorporated many windows in the design of his new office to allow in a lot of natural light, thereby conserving electricity.

GETTING TO KNOW THE COMMUNITY

Wittlinger admits, “I’m still relatively new at this practice, but I offer personalized professionalism and I think people value that. I make the effort to talk with every kid and every parent. We try to keep it friendly here, and we also look to instill a sense of responsibility in patients for their teeth.”

Wittlinger is, in fact, in the process of introducing ways to help motivate his patients, both old and young. He aims to establish a “wooden nickel” prize redemption program and hold patient apprecia-



The Wittlinger Orthodontics team provides the support and positive environment to ensure that patients get the best care and orthodontic experience.

tion outings at such venues as roller rinks and parks.

A community volunteer who is active in his church, playing on its softball team and donating his time to its youth ministries, Wittlinger has a five-year plan to acquaint his neighborhood with his practice. It includes getting involved with schools, participating in health fairs and arranging field trips to his office for scouting groups and the like. He has already sponsored a Little League team, coached by his cousin and featuring his cousin's son. "We had a Wittlinger as sponsor, coach and star player," he recalls with affection.

AN ORTHODONTIST ON THE "BALL"

When he's not bonding, adjusting or removing braces, Wittlinger often can be found in the kitchen cooking up some delicious fare. Sauces, roasts and pastas are his culinary specialties. "My mom is Italian and a gourmet cook. Growing up, I picked up many of her techniques just by sight and smell. In dental school in Richmond, friends would always show up at my place for dinner, because they knew my roommate and I were eating well," he says. "The hardest thing about cooking is timing everything so it all reaches the table hot."

He also is quite handy around the house and garden. During his first summer at VCU, he stayed behind after his roommates went home and purchased a 1925 colonial house in need of major repair. Figuring things out as he moved along, he spent the next four summers refinishing wood floors, painting walls, tearing up tree stumps and doing landscaping. Currently renting, he looks forward to the opportunity to buy another old home and do it all over again.

His greatest passion outside of work, however, is without a doubt his love of baseball and the New York Yankees. Although he went to only a couple of games growing up, he watched the team on television regularly and traded baseball cards. Today, in addition to maintaining his baseball-themed website, he distributes real admission tickets as first appointment cards and posts pictures of his patients on baseball cards on the office bulletin board when their braces come off. And if there's a Yankee game on during office hours, you can bet it will be playing on the waiting room flat-panel TV.

"*Field of Dreams* is one of my favorite movies and part of my thought process has always been 'If I built it, they will come,'" says Wittlinger, who confesses to wanting a career as a professional baseball player in his next lifetime. "So far, it's rung true. I have parents who saw Dr. Markowitz and are now bringing their kids to see me. And some of my high school classmates and my cousins' children have become my patients.

"Orthodontics is so positive and a real pleasure. I've heard a lot of dentists say they'd go into orthodontics if they had to do it all over again," he remarks. "Braces are like a rite of passage, and when I'm completely done, people leave here happy."

And when his patients are Mets fans? "I tell them I won't treat them any differently," he laughs.

Wittlinger Orthodontics is located at 595 Chestnut Ridge Road in Woodcliff Lake New Jersey. For more information call 201-391-5537 or visit the website at www.wittlingerorthodontics.com ■