



All in the Family

For Drs. Christine and Graeme Hibberd, it's family first

When talking to Dr. Christine Hibberd, the word “lucky” comes up a lot. She feels lucky to be part of a large, close-knit family (she has eight siblings). Lucky to have chosen a profession in orthodontics that allows her a good work-life balance. Lucky to have had so many mentors along the way — including her father, Dr. Graeme Hibberd, a well-respected and successful orthodontist in Toronto’s west end, whose busy practice she now shares.

There’s no doubt the odds have been in her favour, but hard work and a “can do” attitude have played a major role in her success. “You just have to be organized, know your priorities and go for it,” says the 32-year-old mother of Jack, 2, and Henry, 1.

It’s a philosophy Christine has always embraced. While she was exposed to the dental profession at a young age (“I have a picture of her on one of my dental chairs holding a toothbrush when she was one and a half,” says Graeme) the one-time competitive dancer, singer and actor had a passion for performing. “I watched her in a high school performance of *My Fair Lady* and she was magnificent,” says her admittedly biased father. “So I thought, ‘That’s where she’s going.’ When she decided to go into dentistry, especially orthodontics, I felt like I’d won the lottery!”

“It was a total switch,” says Christine. “I loved being on stage, but I

wasn’t prepared to give up family. In order to pursue a career in performing, I would really have to go for it and my hours would have been crazy. I knew very early that I wanted to have a family and I wanted time to be around my family.”

Christine took general sciences at the University of Western Ontario before switching to psychology. It wasn’t until her final year at Western that she decided on dentistry and took an additional half semester at the University of Toronto (U of T) to get the prerequisites she needed. Her first acceptance letter came from the University of British Columbia (UBC) and she decided to go for it. “I think it’s probably one of the best decisions I made.” As luck would have it, Christine met her husband, Dr. Andrei Ionescu, at UBC — he was a year ahead of her in the dentistry program and is now finishing a specialty in endodontics at U of T.

After graduating from UBC, Christine applied to the residency program at Toronto’s Hospital for Sick Children. “There were a lot of aspects of dentistry that I really liked and I wasn’t 100 percent sure that I was going to specialize. I thought this would give me a further year of mentorship.” She considered pediatric dentistry, like her aunt, but found that she really enjoyed working in the orthodontic department at the hospital. “There’s a more artistic aspect to orthodontics and it

really appealed to that side of me,” she says. “It seemed the one that fit my background and my training. I see the positive change in kids who come in and they’re really self-conscious and not showing their teeth. By the time they leave, they have beaming smiles. I feel very fortunate to have trained at U of T for orthodontics.” She is the third generation of orthodontic specialists in her family.

Graeme attributes his daughter’s people skills to the time she spent at Sick Kids. “It’s a neat thing when I watch her in action. She just knows how to talk to people and make them feel good.” Christine also gets along well with the staff of 16, some of whom have been with Hibberd Orthodontics for 24 years. “A number of them have known me since I was eight, and that has had its challenges.” They’ve seen me go from the little kid who played with the chairs to one of the people who has the final say.”

Working with her dad, however, has always been easy. “We seem to think very similarly,” she says. “I’m sure that’s partly our training — both being at U of T — but it’s also that we’re both very similar. He has such a way of looking at things and just being able to see it. He has all those years of expertise that he’s slowly showing me.” In return, Christine is helping to modernize the office. “He’s been very good about it, but there’s been some, ‘Are you sure we have to



Three generations of Hibberds, including Elizabeth and Dr. Graeme Hibberd, centre rear, and daughter Dr. Christine Hibberd with husband Dr. Andrei Ionescu and children Jack and Henry, seated left of Elizabeth.

borns. Planning when to have babies based on school schedules and major examination dates, arranging all my prenatal appointments and, later, times to pump around my patient schedules — these are things that my male colleagues who were parents or thinking of becoming parents never had to consider.” You have to know when to ask for help, she says. “I don’t think I would have been able to finish school without my sister Jen and my mom looking after Jack.”

Her husband has also been hugely supportive. “When I was thinking about doing the Sick Kids residency, he said, ‘Absolutely, do it.’ And he was in New York taking his residency and considering staying there at the time.” While she says they do talk shop around the dinner table, their No. 1 topic of conversation is their kids. And future plans. “Andrei is finishing school this year, we’re trying to figure out what he’s going to do, is he going to open a practice himself, associate, where are we going to do this? We’re into that new, exciting, let’s get onto the next stage of life-planning mode.”

This month, the entire Hibberd clan will gather on Christmas Eve as they’ve always done. On Christmas Day, upwards of 44, including extended family, will celebrate together. “I absolutely love having a lot of brothers and sisters,” says Christine. “My sisters are my best friends. I hope Jack and Henry have that with their cousins and future siblings.” She remembers having a conversation with her husband when she was thinking about specializing. “I said, ‘What are we going to do? We want to have a big family. Are we going to be able to do that if I go and specialize?’ And then we said, ‘Yeah, you know what, we’ll figure it out. If you want it enough, there’s a way to make it happen.’”

Cheryl Embrett is a Toronto-based writer and editor.

do that?” she says, laughing. “Trying to get somebody to change, now that’s challenging.”

Graeme was born in Australia, the son of two dental professionals and one of eight children. His father, a specialist in orthodontics, prosthodontics and oral surgery, came to Canada in 1967 as chairman of the Department of Restorative Dentistry at U of T. He died suddenly when Graeme was only 16, and Graeme’s mother, who had her BDF from the University of Melbourne, had to write her Canadian accreditation exam after only three months of study in order to provide for the family. She then went on to get her PhD in periodontics after completing her Canadian boards. “I asked her later, ‘How did you do it?’” says Graeme. “And she said, ‘What choice did I have? When you have to, it’s amazing what you can do.’”

While having strong female role models like her grandmother, mother and aunt have had a major influence on Christine, she says it never felt like “I’m a girl and I can do this. It was more like ‘Anyone can do anything they put their minds to.’” She currently works three to four days a week and is grateful for the family-friendly workplace that orthodontics affords. “It’s very important to me that I’m in-

involved with my kids in the same way that my parents were. I’m thankful that I’m able to have everything I want as both a professional and as a mom, which is not always easy or doable for women in a lot of other professions.”

Still, wearing two hats can be a hard juggle some days. “Arranging childcare, kids’ doctor’s appointments and much of the organizing and cleaning of the house are things that I typically take on,” she says. But being the eldest of nine kids helped Christine develop good coping skills. “I had crazy-busy parents and I always had to be aware of time management because there were so many of us.” Her mother, Elizabeth, was a nurse, studied for her masters of social work at night, worked for an adoption agency and became a private adoption practitioner — all while raising nine children.

Christine’s advice to young female dentists: “You don’t have to choose between family or dentistry. You may have to make some sacrifices somewhere, but everyone makes sacrifices.” In many cases, women practitioners more so than men, she acknowledges. “While we may say everything is equal among the genders, the truth is that women need to contend with the physical realities of pregnancy, birth and raising new-