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## University of North Texas freshman on way toward smile she could never show



*Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer*

**Robina Rayamajhi**, a blind University of North Texas freshman from Nepal, is getting help with her dental issues from Plano orthodontist Deepak Gupta. Sharon Brignac took photos of Robina Rayamajhi's teeth to document her progress.

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Robina Rayamajhi used to practice smiling with her lips closed, so self-conscious was she about the turmoil that lay behind.

Legally blind, the [University of North Texas](#) freshman had nonetheless graduated in the top 8 percent of her class at Irving's Jack E. Singley Academy.

But oral disfigurement left unchecked in her native [Nepal](#) threatened to undermine the promise of a young woman whose radiant personality lacked the smile to match.

Now, local oral care professionals are donating their services to help give Rayamajhi's smile the symmetry most people take for granted.

"She's a pretty girl," [Plano](#) orthodontist Deepak Gupta said. "She loves to smile and laugh. If she has any reservations about smiling, we want to take those away."

Born with cataracts, Rayamajhi had endured a childhood of eye surgeries and doctor visits.

Preoccupied with her worsening vision, her parents paid little attention to the extreme overcrowding taking place in her mouth; in Nepal, she said, dental care was much cheaper and cosmetic fixes less important.

"The original plan was to wait until I grew up and got a job and then get them fixed," Rayamajhi said.

Then, glaucoma began stealing her sight at age 11. Intent on saving her vision, she and her parents came to the U.S. on medical visas when she was 13.

In America, they found appearances much more important, and dental care not nearly as affordable — especially for immigrants starting from scratch.

"Here, it's very different," Rayamajhi said. "You grow up and want to look good."

Her condition was impossible to hide. Teeth that outgrew her too-small jaw had pushed other teeth forward and forced others inward, creating an overlapping and mismatched thicket of dentin and enamel.

Some teeth seemed too big, others too small. Another seemed totally superfluous. Her lips couldn't comfortably close, and she constantly bit her tongue.

"When you saw her, those teeth just kind of jumped out at you," said Dallas dentist Philip Kozlow, who offered to coordinate her reconstruction.

"She had a mouthful of teeth that didn't look like they belonged there."

Because it was hard for Rayamajhi to close her lips, Kozlow said, her gum tissue often dried out and became inflamed. The condition could pose health issues as she got older.

And for an 18-year-old who despite her [blindness](#) had achieved academic success and hoped to be a lawyer someday, it was debilitating.

### Key to interaction

Smiles are the green lights of human interaction. They lift moods, enhance beauty, indicate approachability.

"Over 90 percent of our communication is nonverbal," said SMU business instructor Chris Westfall,

named “communicator of the year” by [Texas Christian University](#) in February.

Consciously or not, people seek gestures from others that pave the way for effective and open exchange. A smile is one of those expected signs.

“If there’s something getting in the way of something as simple as a smile, it can be a real limiting factor,” Westfall said. “It’s almost like not being able to speak a language.”

As a youngster, Rayamajhi didn’t enjoy smiling, often keeping her head down out of shyness.

“Her smile was not an open opportunity for her to invite other people into her life,” said Mary Ann Siller, a blind-services consultant.

Siller met Rayamajhi when the girl was in middle school and eventually introduced her to Kozlow, a longtime friend. “I thought if we could ever do anything to help her, it would change her life forever,” Siller said.

Rayamajhi’s transformation will require about two years of orthodontic work to create the space Kozlow needs to insert teeth more appropriately sized for her mouth.

“I think we can really give her a pretty smile,” the dentist said.

For Rayamajhi, that’s an outcome long hoped for. “It’s going to change everything for me,” she said.

### Team effort

Rayamajhi’s case, her doctors said, is among the most severe they’ve seen. Kozlow knew something this complicated would require a team effort and eventually brought Gupta on board.

“She’s such a delightful person,” Kozlow said. “We all just kind of took to her. Her attitude was just magnetic.”

Their work began in July. Kozlow removed two of her upper premolars and, a month later, Gupta fitted her with braces that would realign the rest and help move protruding canines backward.

In just months, the improvement has been remarkable. Rayamajhi could literally sense the makeover happening within.

“My teeth are moving around so fast,” she said. “Within days, they were already in line.”

Last month, Rayamajhi, small and svelte, lounged in a green leather exam chair, trying not to squirm in her zebra-striped dress as Gupta replaced her upper braces with stiffer wiring.

The next step, he told her, would be for Kozlow to extract two of her lower teeth.

“Everything looks really good,” Gupta said. “You’re cruising along.”

Already, Rayamajhi said, her parents are thrilled with her improvement.

“My mom is, like, ‘Open your mouth, Robina. Oh! Your teeth look so different.’”

“That’s awesome,” Gupta said. “And this is just the beginning.”

### Finding her resources

Rayamajhi has 20/400 vision in one eye and can barely perceive light with the other. When it’s dark, she uses a cane to get around.

In the U.S., she said, she found the resources she needed to succeed. She hopes to return to Nepal someday and advocate for other blind children there.

This summer, she participated in a career-exploration camp and spent a month interning with the Denton County district attorney’s office.

Rayamajhi’s late grandfather was a prominent lawyer in Nepal who’d hoped that one of his three sons would follow him into the profession. None did.

“Now that she’s pursuing this career choice, it will give his spirit a rest,” said Rayamajhi’s father, Rabindra.

The doctors’ work will help her get there, her father said. “We are very thankful this opportunity came along,” he said. “It’s God’s blessing.”

Rayamajhi is already talking more freely, less concerned about how she looks.

“When you know there’s something wrong, you hesitate,” she said. “You don’t give your fullest. Now I smile so much more than I used to.”



*Casts taken of Robina Rayamajhi's teeth show the severe dental problems that have plagued her for years.*

### AT A GLANCE: Multiple dental problems

Robina Rayamajhi has an underdeveloped jaw, which caused overcrowding among the teeth that had grown in.

Meanwhile, some upper teeth were missing, while those that were there had grown in at awkward angles, pushing her canines forward.

“Part of the problem is her jaw is not big enough to accommodate the teeth she had,” Dallas dentist Philip Kozlow said. “It’s not common, but we see it now and again.”

Kozlow removed two upper teeth to create room for her canines to migrate backward with the help of braces applied by Plano orthodontist Deepak Gupta. Movement will occur throughout.

“We’re moving teeth, putting them back in positions where they should be,” Kozlow said.

Rayamajhi’s orthodontic work will continue for about two years before Kozlow fills the created upper space with a bridge or crown.