

# All he wanted for Christmas was ...

A local dentist and 3 specialists provide \$40,000 worth of free restoration for a Divine Word student

By **DIANE HELDT**  
TH staff writer

Dubuque dentist Ted Murray wasn't sure what could be done.

At the suggestion of his wife, Carol, Murray contacted Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, last January in the hopes of providing dental care to one of the Sudanese students in refugees studying transition/3A at the school.

Divine Word sent him Martin Akoon.

Murray was not prepared for the severity of Akoon's needs.

"I'd never seen anything like this before, and I've been a dentist for 26 years," said Murray, who specializes in dental restoration.

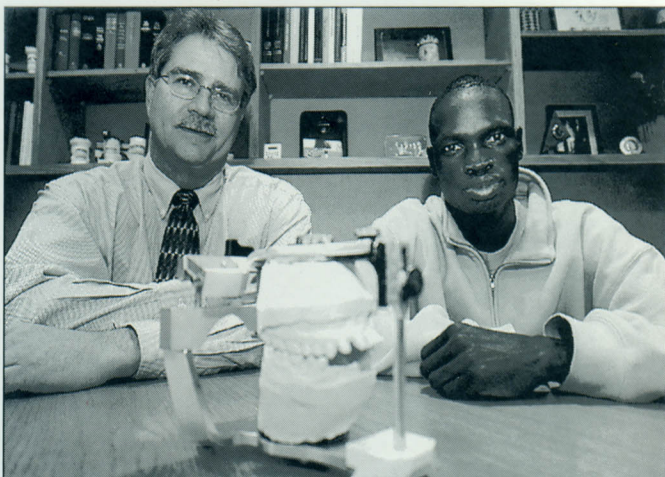
Akoon, 22, was missing his lower front teeth, as well as a few in the back. His upper front teeth were sticking straight out, nearly horizontal, and they also were abscessed.

After the initial examination, the X-rays, photos and teeth models sat on Murray's desk for weeks. The dentist was stumped.

Ideal treatment seemed impossible because of the resources needed to provide such care, Murray said.

"One day, the thought struck me, 'what would I do if cost was not a consideration?'" he said.

The Murrays began contacting friends who are dental specialists. Four specialists agreed to donate



TH: Ben Plank

Dr. Ted Murray (left) and Martin Akoon sit in Murray's dental office Monday afternoon in Dubuque. Murray and three other local specialists have been providing Akoon with free dental work.

their services.

"Everybody said yes so fast," Murray said. "I didn't have to talk anybody into it. It was amazing."

Everything hinged on finding a company to donate the expensive implants and hardware. Mike Dalton, the Dubuque oral surgeon who performed the implant surgery, found a willing partner in 3i Implants, an international company specializing in implant technology.

Ten months and about \$40,000 worth of donated dental work later, Akoon has braces on his upper teeth. And in a few weeks, Murray will begin work to build porcelain teeth onto the metal implants in Akoon's bottom gums.

The soft-spoken student is excited to get his new bottom teeth after months of appointments and procedures.

"I was not worried about the pain. I was worried because I don't know who will pay the money," he said. "But Dr. Murray said 'you're going to have the implants; we're going to see what happens in your teeth.' So I said 'OK, no problem.' It seems very amazing to me."

Michael Fuhs, a Dubuque endodontist, performed root canals on Akoon's abscessed teeth. Dalton last spring placed the eight implants in Akoon's gums. Jim Hemphill is the Dubuque ortho-

dontist working on Akoon's braces. A lab technician friend of Murray's based in California is handling the prosthetic side of the case, constructing the metal framework for the implants.

The case was so unusual that Murray also used it as a teaching example at the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry.

"Martin has been really cool through this whole thing," Murray said. "It's a lot of complicated dental stuff, and I'm sure it seems strange to him."

Akoon, who has been at Divine Word since August 2002, said he is grateful for all the help. To show his appreciation, he gave Murray a videotape telling the story of refugees like himself, often called "Lost Boys of Sudan."

"Martin has done very well through all of this," said Bro. Mike Decker, the health care provider at Divine Word who accompanied Akoon to many of his early appointments. "I'm just happy we've made as much progress as we have."

Murray said it's been gratifying to see Akoon become more self-confident throughout the process.

"Anytime you can do something that actually changes people's lives, there's an emotional reward," Murray said. "I think everybody's very emotionally involved now."