

## Kaleigh Warden

*Nominator: Wayne Chan*

How My Hygienist Ruined Christmas But is Still a Superhero. Sometimes you don't realize how important someone is to you until she is gone. I was scheduled for a dental cleaning a couple of days before Christmas last year. It was an appointment to which I was really looking forward. Kaleigh had been my hygienist for close to ten years, and maybe it's presumptuous of me as a mere client, but I also thought of her as a friend. I was expecting that we would catch up on each other's lives since my last visit and I would wish her the compliments of the season. A few weeks before the appointment, however, I received a voicemail at work. I heard the familiar voice of Val, the receptionist at the Waverley Dental Centre. "We have to reschedule your appointment," she said. "I'm sorry to say that K will no longer be with us. She has accepted another position". I was so shocked that I had to listen to the message again. My mind was reeling and refused to comprehend it. I kept looking for loopholes. Maybe Val meant that K was only going to be away temporarily, like for a secondment. I couldn't return the call, though, because the office had already closed for the day. After a restless night, I decided to stop by the dental office the next morning, because I needed to hear the news firsthand. Val, it seems, was expecting me. She patiently explained that K was leaving to work full-time at the University of Manitoba's School of Dental Hygiene, where she was already working a couple of days a week as a clinical instructor. It was true, then. My heart sank. Rationally, I knew that it was silly to be so attached to someone that I saw only twice a year, but I couldn't help what I was feeling. And to top it off, I wouldn't get to say goodbye to her in person before she left. I was gutted. In a single day, the holiday season seemed to have lost its brightness and color. Before K, I never gave a second thought to dental hygienists. It was a profession I knew little about and cared even less about. But getting to know her over the years, I gained a new respect for the profession. I tried to learn more about it and the training it involved. I learned the tooth numbering system because of K, and I learned the names of the different tooth surfaces because of her. Most importantly, I went from being totally indifferent to my dental care to being much more diligent because of her. Nowadays, I even recommend dental hygiene to students considering a career in healthcare. In recent years, K has been juggling a second job as an clinical instructor, as I had mentioned. She also mentors dental hygiene students and is actively involved in the Manitoba Dental Hygiene Association and was its past president. A few years ago, she went back to university and completed a degree in

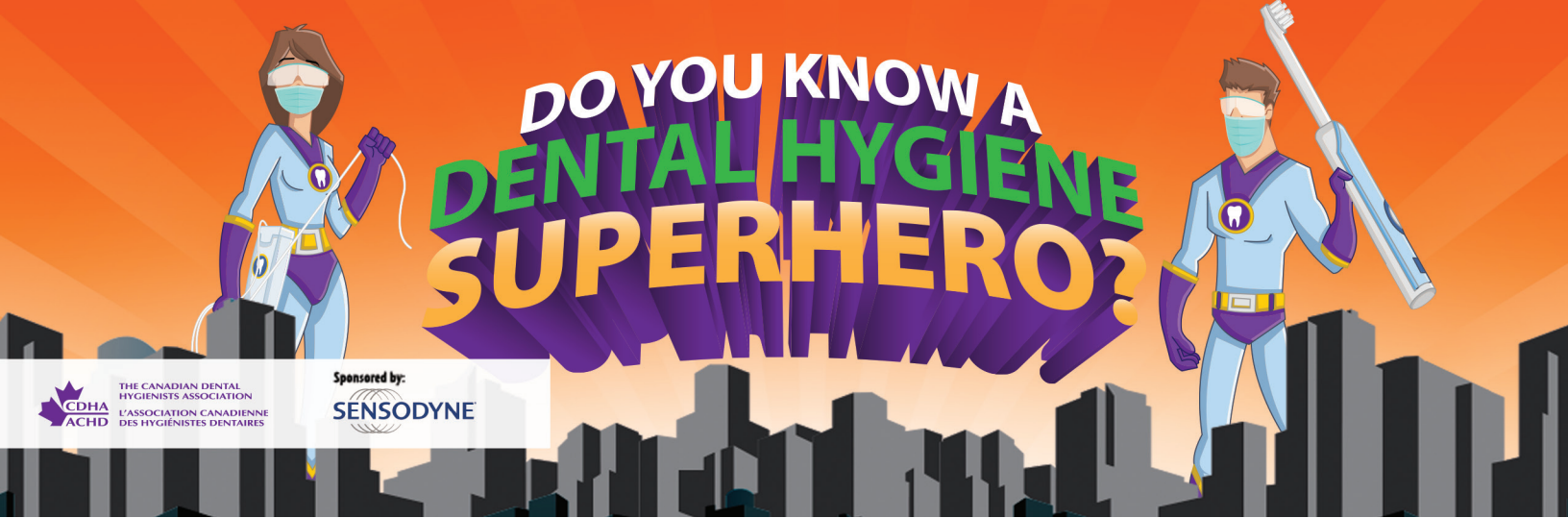


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2016. In her spare-time she gives back to the community and participates in events in support of cancer and Alzheimer’s research. Plus, she is a new mom on top of all that. If that’s not worthy of superhero status, I don’t know what is! I write as a hobby, and I’ve often called K my unlikely muse. Perhaps it’s because we’re so different, but I appreciated her perspective on things. She is directly responsible for my first (and only) publication in a national magazine, and for several writing ideas over the years. Not only did she take care of my teeth and gums, she helped me with my writer’s block! Tell me, how many other hygienists can claim this? The CDHA contest asks if your dental hygienist is a superhero. But first, we have to clearly define what a superhero is, and whether K is one. Rather than look up the ordinary dictionary definition, I decided to consult an authority on the topic. Peter Coogan, director of the Institute for Comics Studies (yes, that’s apparently a real institute), did his doctoral dissertation on superheroes. In his book, “Superhero: the Secret Origin of a Genre”, Coogan defines a superhero as having three elements: a pro-social, selfless mission, superpowers--in the form of “extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical abilities”, and a costume and codename. Let’s see if the definition fits my favorite hygienist: Every day, K dons her mask, gloves, and safety glasses and becomes “The Hygienist”. Wielding her high-tech ultrasonic scaler, stainless steel weapons, and superhuman finger strength, she fights the implacable foes of Plaque and Periodontal Disease. Costume and codename? Check. Pro-social mission? Check. Superpowers in the form of highly developed abilities and advanced technology? Check. She’s officially a bona fide superhero. So yes, the departure of my hygienist ruined Christmas, but she is still my superhero. Speaking for myself and K’s other clients, our loss is the dental hygiene school’s gain. (The school, by the way, is my new arch-nemesis. Like a defeated supervillain, I shake my fist and shout, “Curse you School of Dental Hygiene for stealing her away!!” However, I digress.) But now, like Professor Xavier of the X-Men, K will go on to teach and mentor the next generation of dental superheroes. There’s nothing more noble than that. And that is why I nominate her for this contest. Thank you, K, for having been my hygienist and hero.