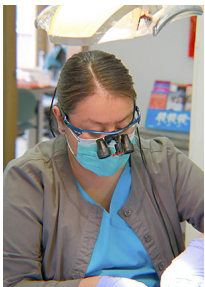


## Diné dentist brings career, family to Gallup

Written by By Boderra Joe Sun Correspondent  
Tuesday, 28 November 2017 16:41

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Originally from Aztec, N.M., Diné dentist Dr. DezBaa Damon-Mallette returned to her people of the Navajo Nation in July to work at Rainaldi Dental in Gallup.

Damon-Mallette was previously working in the Rio Rancho area of Albuquerque, at The Hygiene Center, a small private office. At the time, her husband, Louis Mallette, was completing his education at the University of New Mexico School of Law. After earning his degree, Mallette and his wife discussed where they might settle down with 2-year-old son, Miles Mallette.

Damon-Mallette touched base with Dr. Lidio Rainaldi, owner of Rainaldi Dental. Rainaldi said that Damon-Mallette came out to visit, and he told her to work for a couple of days to try it out.

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“She did that and it worked out well,” he said. “She made the decision over time to come.”

Being in business for over 30 years, Rainaldi said having Damon-Mallette on staff has been great for him. Especially when they’re not so busy. Rainaldi said he finds himself spending more quality time with his patients, instead of feeling like he’s just checking in on them.

“She’s very compassionate and warm with the patients,” Rainaldi said. “Plus, she has 10 years of experience, which is great because she has a lot of experience with patient care and procedures. She just brought new life to the business.”

### **A FAMILIAR HOME**

Things took off for the 39-year-old dentist. Damon-Mallette felt welcomed by the community’s open arms.

“It’s very difficult to find the right person to come to any small town,” Rainaldi said. “But what helped was that she has family in the area, which is great.”

Despite having made a big move, Damon-Mallette adjusted to Gallup quickly and comfortably. She has established herself thanks to her hard work, and to the focus and dedication she provides her patients.

Rainaldi was surprised at first by how welcoming the patients were towards Damon-Mallette, a newcomer, and how trustworthy they were.

“I’m just getting a lot, a lot of compliments about her,” Rainaldi said. “For every business owner, you kind of wonder how that person’s going to fit in, and she’s been a very good fit.”

### **MORE THAN TEETH**

For Damon-Mallette, when it comes to her patient's appointments, it's not just about filling a cavity or caring for a toothache.

"It's constant listening and problem solving," she said. "It's not always, 'They need this done and that done,' that's not always the case."

Damon-Mallette said that the anatomy of a patient is what's most important, because not everyone has the same symptoms. A good dentist needs to look at the person fully, and treat current problems for how they might affect the patient in the long run.

A cavity, of course, is a hole in the tooth. But it's also much more than that.

"Every person's anatomy of their tooth looks different," Damon-Mallette said. "You have to look at what's around the tooth and how to form it to that same type."

There's a lot more to observe than just fixing a tooth. Damon-Mallette said the real work is in noticing little things, like how the patient chews. There's a ton of sculpting and persistence that takes place during her treatment.

### **EDUCATION AND EXPERIENCE**

Damon-Mallette graduated from Aztec High School in 1996. She then continued her education at Arizona State University, where she earned her Bachelor of Science in biology with a minor in anthropology in 2001.

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After graduation, Damon-Mallette worked for two years at the Arizona Department of Education's Certification and Investigative Unit. She later applied to the Arizona School of Dentistry & Oral Health in Mesa, Ariz., where she was accepted into the school's first class in 2003. She graduated four years later, in 2007.

After graduation, Damon-Mallette found herself on an adventure, working in Bethel, Alaska, setting up and managing small clinics in different villages across the state.

"I went out there because I like the fact that you can fly out to different villages," she said. "It was hard work and something really different. Not a lot of dentists really do that."

After spending four years in Alaska, Damon-Mallette decided to move back to the reservation. She took a job in the Four Corners area at Nizhoni Smiles, Inc., in Shiprock, N.M., as the dental director.

### **PURSUING A CAREER**

"I always knew I wanted be a dentist since I was 5-years-old," Damon-Mallette said. "When I went to the dentist, I liked what they did with their hands. I really enjoyed seeing the instruments and people working together. It was just something I really liked."

Growing up, she wouldn't hesitate to ask questions during appointments with her childhood dentist, Dr. Kenneth Dunston. It was during these appointments that Damon-Mallette learned which classes to take in high school and college.

The more Damon-Mallette became determined to pursue a career as a dentist, the more she grew fond of working with her hands, working with people and solving problems.

But it wasn't easy.

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Once she began her career, there were sacrifices she had to make, like moving to numerous locations, adjusting to new environments and questioning herself.

One thing that Damon-Mallette had to overcome was being by herself.

“When you first go somewhere new, it’s very lonely,” she said. “It’s always hard in the beginning when you first move somewhere different.”

New places may open up new opportunities but they also bring new challenges.

One particular challenge Damon-Mallette remembers occurred while she was in college. Her guidance counselor refused to help her with her classes. Damon-Mallette said the guidance counselor indirectly let her know that becoming a dentist wasn’t an option for her.

“She made it seem like I couldn’t do it,” Damon-Mallette said.

But she took matters into her own hands. She registered for classes that she needed, reviewed everything she needed to do and made her own schedule to get into dental school.

“That was one thing that was always hard,” she said. “I always tell people that if someone tells you you can’t do it, don’t take it to heart and give up. You have to believe in yourself more than anything.”

Damon-Mallette admitted that she didn’t get straight A’s and that she had a hard time with some of her classes. Those were the times where she questioned herself, asking, “Okay, can I do this? Will I be able to get in?”

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Becoming a dentist is competitive, but she continued to work hard, continued to ask herself tough questions and refused to give up.

“I think that’s one of the biggest things I’ve learned,” Damon-Mallette said. “Even now. There are new things that come along and you wonder, ‘Okay, can I do it?’”

### **INFLUENCING SUCCESS**

Damon-Mallette’s parents, Betty Patterson-Damon of Mexican Water, Ariz. and Al Damon of Mexican Springs, and her late grandmother, Bessie Patterson, were the foundation of the dentist’s success.

“We always encouraged her to go after what she wanted to be,” Patterson-Damon said. “If being a dentist was what she really wanted to be, we told her that she really needed to study.”

The couple raised their daughter to also take interest in other things, and encouraged multi-tasking, since it often takes time for someone to figure out what they really like. But becoming a dentist was always on top of Damon-Mallette’s list.

“I wrote down my goals,” Damon-Mallette said. “The bigger the goal, the harder it’s going to be. You have to be willing to endure your challenges.”

Patterson-Damon said that her daughter has always been a serious child and student, and set the bar high for herself growing up. She was always competitive.

“She had different life experiences and exposure in her upbringing,” Patterson-Damon said. “Self-identity played a big role in her life.”

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When it came to talking about her grandmother, Damon-Mallette expressed compassion and affection. She said her grandmother had a huge influence on her life.

“She’s still with me,” Damon-Mallette said. “Even though she’s gone, she’s still with me.”

Patterson-Damon said that her own mother would have been proud of her granddaughter, since she has finally reached the milestone that she always dreamed of.

“She [Patterson] set the example for DezBaa,” Patterson-Damon said. “And she always said, ‘Nobody is going to wait for you. Nobody is going to hold your hand.’”

The knowledge that Damon-Mallette has gained from her grandmother, mother and father she now gives back to her patients and the people she works with. Her family taught her how to be aggressive, how to get educated and how to develop a career. These lessons could be difficult—especially as a Native woman.

“My husband and I are very proud of our daughter for taking the challenge to become a dentist,” Patterson-Damon said. “We love and support her in all her endeavors and aspiration as she journeys on in her dental career. We will continue to encourage her to reach the next level in dental work and patient care.”

## **ENCOURAGEMENT**

Damon-Mallette’s journey to become a dentist wasn’t easy. And she said there were no shortcuts.

Damon-Mallette would like to encourage others who are interested in dentistry to prepare themselves. Her advice: gather all the classes you needed, make sure it’s something you really want to do and work with your hands more.

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Even if becoming a dentist isn't on your list, she encourages you to write down your goals, to remember them and to remind yourself of what you want to do with your life.

At the end of the day, "The goal is how you want to see yourself," Damon-Mallette said.

By Boderra Joe

Sun Correspondent