

# Chrissy Steltz of Milwaukie, injured by shotgun blast, tries on prosthetic face after yearlong effort

Published: Saturday, July 10, 2010, 8:15 PM Updated: Tuesday, July 13, 2010, 11:48 AM



**Special to The Oregonian**

What Steltz playfully called her "unveiling" took place just past noon Thursday in the Eugene office of Dr. Larry Over, where he and Dr. David Trainer had spent four days fashioning her new prosthetic face. Seven family members and friends gathered to see Steltz for the first time without a black mask. It was the culmination of a yearlong effort to build the face -- and make it fit snugly and seamlessly over the scarred remains of her original one.

An accidental shotgun blast 11 years ago blew away Steltz's eyes, nose and cheeks. She was 16, a sophomore at Portland's Franklin High School, living with her then-boyfriend, 18. The shooting happened at a party where teenagers were drinking heavily. The teen fooling around with the gun when it went off served 27 months in prison for second-degree assault. Steltz's boyfriend was given probation for the theft of 15 guns, including the one that nearly killed her. Steltz, who waited in the car during the gun burglary, was not charged. Police and prosecutors agreed that her injuries were punishment enough.

After six weeks in Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, Steltz went home -- blind, without a nose, and with a rebuilt jaw that still prevents her from opening her mouth wide enough to eat a sandwich. But she returned to Franklin High for her junior year with an aide and graduated with her class in 2001.

The next year, through the Commission for the Blind, she met Dilger, the man who has become her partner. He, too, lost his sight suddenly as a teenager, when a tumor on his pituitary gland crushed his optic nerve. Dilger and Steltz have a son, Geoffrey Jr., who turns 1 on July 23.

Soon after her initial recovery, Steltz looked into ways to rebuild her face or restore a measure of its natural appearance.

One idea came from Over, a Eugene dentist and specialist in facial prosthetics: a "face" that would recreate her original features -- with acrylic eyes and a silicone nose and skin -- and fit over her scars like a realistic mask.

That sounded outlandish to Steltz -- "like what you'd see in a movie or something" -- and she wasn't ready. She needed to mature, physically and emotionally, and achieve some stability in her life. She also lacked health coverage for the procedure, because Oregon's Medicaid plan considered a facial prosthesis primarily cosmetic.

By 2008, Steltz was ready. But soon another life change: She found out she was pregnant. Having a child would give Steltz an even more powerful incentive to resume her quest for a new face. "I would like to look like a regular person again, a plain Jane," she said, "so my little boy can grow up looking at a regular mom."

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Steltz, 27, underwent four surgeries to prepare her face for the prosthesis. In September, Dr. Eric Dierks, a Portland head-and-neck surgeon, cut a nasal opening where she had none. And in February, he drilled eight screwlike implants into bones above and below her eye sockets. The prosthesis snaps onto those implants, held in place by tiny magnets.

Chrissy Steltz returned to Dr. Larry Over's office in Eugene Wednesday for the third day of the process to create a prosthesis for her damaged face. Over adds some coloring to Steltz's new prosthesis. Dierks and Over have collaborated on many cases, but none as complicated as Steltz's. And because her prosthesis required two eyes as well as a nose and cheeks, Over enlisted Trainer, a Florida-based prosthetist who specializes in faces. All three doctors donated their time on the case; Steltz's insurance paid for the hospital costs of her surgery, Zimmer Dental donated the implants, and **an anonymous private donation helped defray other costs.**

The first thing Trainer does with a patient like Steltz is something she usually would hate. He sits directly across from her and stares intently at her face. He studies her facial movement as she talks, frowns, laughs.

"Because that will affect how the thing moves on her face," Trainer said. "When you laugh, your nostrils flare a bit. When I put the nose on the patient and she laughs, the prosthesis better laugh too." By definition, a silicone prosthesis is not alive. But it cannot be totally inert.

"You don't want a store mannequin kind of blank look," Trainer said. "You want an individuality, so that someone seeing her will say, 'That's Chrissy.' "

The hardest part, he said, is "setting the eyes so that they *look*." Not stare, but look. "So that when she turns her head, it's as if she were looking."

Trainer, who has worked on more than 2,000 faces, doesn't use the word "cosmetic."

"What if it were your mom who wouldn't leave the house because of how she looked? The function of it is to allow that person to go back to a normal way of life. They're not freaks," he said of his disfigured patients. "They've just had bad luck, and they want people to stop staring at them."

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During the past 11 years, Steltz has grown more comfortable about appearing in public with her black sleep shade. Part of her motivation for getting a prosthetic face, she says, is to keep others from feeling embarrassed.

In keeping with that idea, Steltz in February visited a fifth-grade class at Seth Lewelling Elementary School in Milwaukie. The visit was instigated by Shyanne, born four months after Steltz was shot.

Despite an age difference of 16 years, the two sisters are close -- regular BFFs. Chrissy was Shy's first and favorite babysitter and took care of her after school for many years while their mom worked at Fred Meyer. Shyanne has never seen Chrissy's damaged face and doesn't want to.

The sisters sit up front, facing the class. The fifth-graders stare at Steltz, fixed on her black mask. They have been well-prepped by the teacher but can't help gawking, not sure what to expect.

"How are you guys?" Steltz starts.

"Fine!" they shout in unison.

Steltz, in control but a little nervous, gets her topic sentence out of the way: "I had a really bad accident that happened that caused me to go blind 10 years ago. But just because I had a bad accident doesn't mean life is over."

The questions start even before Steltz calls for them. It dawns on the kids that she can't see them raise their hands anyway, so why not just speak up?

A girl wants to know whether Steltz can smell stuff even if she doesn't have a nose. (No, but she can taste food, sort of.)

"Wait, I don't get it," another says. "I forget. What happened?"

Steltz recounts the short version. "OK, so 10 years ago, a friend was playing with a 12-gauge shotgun."

"He was your friend?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, the gun was loaded, and I was shot. Fortunately, I survived."

"Wait, the gun went past you?"

"It went in me." She points to where the gunshot entered the side of her face, and, for emphasis, notes that she has 33 BBs inside her head.

More questions. Does she get headaches? Was it painful? Where exactly was the boy who shot her? Did he go to jail? Was it an accident? Was he upset? Is she still mad at him? What did it feel like?

A boy speaks up: "I'm sorry if this sounds a bit rude, but when did you notice that your face was kind

of missing?"

Steltz doesn't flinch. "It's not rude at all," she says. She explains that she was in the hospital, unconscious or sedated, a long time before she realized what had happened, or even that she was blind. Someone had to tell her.

Back to her main message.

"On a positive note, I lived through this. ... I have taken the fact that I have become disabled and made the most of it. Just because I'm blind, it doesn't mean I can't go out and still do fun things like you guys do." White water rafting, tandem biking, ice skating, miniature golfing.

One of the girls is still stuck on how this masked person, who speaks so clearly and easily, cannot see.

"Even though you can't really see people, you can still kinda, like, picture things in your mind, right?"

"Oh, yeah," Steltz says. She remembers seeing before she went blind, and she can see in her dreams.

After more questions about blindness comes the climax of her talk. To fix her, she explains, the doctors needed a replica of her head. She takes out the life-size red plastic model of her skull.

Oohs from the kids.

On the red model, feeling with her fingers, she shows them the piece of bone that surgeons removed from her leg and fit into her blasted midface to give it some structure. "So, on your face, it's just, like, indented, but it has skin on there, right?"

Yes, Steltz says, explaining how titanium dental implants drilled into her face like screws will hold in place the prosthetic mask she'll wear in public.

"I will be putting my face on every morning," Steltz says.

"But not literally," a kid says.

"Literally," Steltz corrects him.

"I feel sad for your eyes," a child says, and Steltz meets that one head-on:

"Don't be sorry. There's nothing to be sorry for. I'm not someone who wants you to feel sorry for me.

I'm still alive. I'm still here, having fun. I am very happy."

"So you can take your eyeballs on and off," a student says, incredulous.

Yes, Steltz says, "like a nice-looking Halloween mask."

Final question: "Can you cry?"

"Yes," Steltz says.

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Building Steltz's facial prosthesis took four days.

Day One, they took an impression of Steltz's face and cast it in dental plaster as the basis for a wax model called the wax-up. They sculpted the flesh-colored wax with instruments heated in the flame of a small torch like a Bunsen burner. The wax-up served as a mock-up of the prosthesis.

Day Two, the wax-up became a placeholder between two plaster molds, top and bottom. The wax-up made a space in the exact shape of the prosthesis-to-come. Then they heated the molds to soften the wax, so it could be cleaned away to make room for the silicone.

Day Three, they poured syrupy flesh-tinted silicone into the molds, clamped them tightly together, and "baked" the whole thing at 230 degrees for 90 minutes to cure the silicone and seal in its color. Then they pried apart the molds, revealing the hardened silicone prosthesis.

Day Four was for final touch-ups, including eyelashes.

Each step entailed painstaking and often tedious detail work, as the wax-up -- and later the prosthesis -- were shaped, tweaked, smoothed and colored by hand. "It's as much art as science," Over said.

The result is a durable replica of Steltz's midface, slightly aged. It weighs less than 2 ounces. She'll take it off only to sleep, for daily cleaning and if she goes swimming.

Steltz spent much of those four days sitting in an examining room, stock-still as if for a portrait, chin thrust forward, while Trainer and Over sculpted and fitted her new face. On a table lay a close-up photo of her before she was shot.

Trainer took the lead, but he and Over worked in tandem. Again and again, their gaze would move from her face to the photograph to the mirror to the prosthesis and back. Tweak, brush, dab, smooth,

snip, press, dab again.

At one point, Trainer handed Steltz a tiny paper cup and asked her to pretend she was taking a drink. "If the nose is too big," he explained, "the cup will hit it."

Monday evening, they took the wax-up home for more tweaking, at a workbench in Over's garage, next to his model trains. During Tuesday's lunch break, Over and Trainer stopped at Walgreens to buy two pairs of brown eyelashes and eyeliner.

Wednesday afternoon, the cup of tinted silicone that would become Steltz's new face looked like a Frappuccino.

Their tools ranged from a scalpel and a high-speed lathe to a Q-tip, a toothbrush and a snippet of plastic bag. They used a "rainbow" of 10 tiny paint pots for the final coloration.

"Skin's not one color," Trainer said. The final tone of Steltz's prosthesis was a blend of many pigments.

"I see an art project -- part chemistry," Steltz said as they worked beside her.

The biggest challenges: giving the face a natural "gaze" and blending the margins where the prosthesis meets the face. The edges are as thin and translucent as wax paper. Also, the tiny magnets imbedded in the prosthesis must align perfectly with the studded implants poking out of her face -- but they must not show through.

Once the prosthesis came out of the oven and they popped in the polished acrylic eyes, Steltz could test her almost-completed new face.

"Could you smile?" Trainer asked. "Very good."

Double fist-pump.

In the morning they would add eyelashes, seal in Steltz's favorite bronze eye shadow and mascara, and shade the slight discoloration on her left cheek.

"So, do I have to wear eye makeup with this," Steltz asked.

"No," Over said. "You're good to go."

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Thursday morning, they arrived early at Over's office.

"I think this is the most excited I've ever been in my life," Steltz said.

She took her accustomed seat in the exam room, sleep shade off. Trainer put the prosthesis on her and dabbed at the edges with a Q-tip, then took it off and popped the left eye out.

With a scalpel, he made a cut in the eyelid, inserted the lashes with tweezers, trimmed them, then put the eye back in. Same for the right.

Ten more minutes in the oven to seal in the lashes and makeup, and it would be done.

Steltz tried on two pairs of sunglasses over the sleep shade, and picked the less-dark ones.

More feminine, Over agreed.

Just before noon, it was time for Steltz to try on her new face. Over brought it in and clicked it in place over her scars.

Steltz smiled. "Comfortable," she said.

She brought her fingers to her face and pinched the tip of her nose between them, then ran her hands over her cheeks.

"I haven't felt that in 11 years," she said.

Time to step out of the room and let her family come in so she could make her grand entrance.

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When Steltz modeled her new face Thursday in Over's crowded office, she made sure Geoffrey Jr. was not in the room. He was the one family member she was reluctant to show her new face to, because he had never seen his mother without the black sleep shade. His private showing would come later, in the familiar surroundings of home, so he could realize that it really was Mom -- this new, normal face speaking to him in that same recognizable voice.

Back in their Milwaukie apartment Thursday evening, Steltz sat in the living room easy chair, her sleep shade over the prosthesis, the baby on her lap. It was nearly bedtime.

"You know what?" she said suddenly. "I'm just going to do this." And she slipped the sleep shade off, then held Geoffrey up to her new face.

"Hi, it's Mom!" she said, staring at him with her blue nonseeing eyes.

He smiled and giggled. And then, unfazed, turned back toward the middle of the room, where the family cat, Xochi, was walking past the couch.

"Perfect!" Steltz said, with a mixture of relief and mock insult. "No interest whatsoever. He looks at me like chopped liver."

Shyanne watched from the kitchen doorway, delighted. She had been the family dissenter on the whole prosthesis idea. And that morning, she had been anxious about seeing her sister with a new face.

"I was afraid she might be a different person," Shyanne said. "Act differently or something. But she was just the same. She didn't change.

"And I don't think I've ever seen her that happy."

-- **Don Colburn**