

"Now, instead of staring at me, people will listen," says Steltz (at her Milwaukie, Ore., home), who hopes to lecture about gun safety.



# A NEW FACE FOR CHRISSY

Eleven years after an accidental shooting left her blind and disfigured, Chrissy Steltz gets a life-changing prosthesis **BY KRISTEN MASCIA**

INSETS: COURTESY CHRISSY STELTZ



"He's gorgeous," says Chrissy (with Geoff Jr.).

**H**olding her 1-year-old, Geoffrey, in her lap, Chrissy Steltz smiles as she feels his chubby hands explore her face. "Peekaboo," says Steltz, 27, lifting her own hand to reveal bright blue eyes. "He sees his mama."

Blinded by a shotgun accident 11 years ago, Steltz can't return his gaze. But, for the first time, Steltz—whose eyes, nose and cheeks were destroyed in the blast, leaving a crater where her features should be—can show her child a fully formed face that resembles the one she lost. "We wanted her to be the best she could be," says Portland, Ore., head and neck surgeon Eric Dierks, one of three specialists who helped create a state-of-the-art prosthetic face (see box). "And now she is."

For Steltz, after more than a decade of wearing a satin sleeping mask to protect herself from the gasps of strangers, it's the transformation of a lifetime. A popular blonde, blue-eyed honors student, her life changed forever when, on March 21, 1999, during a night of drinking, a friend fiddling with a 12-gauge shotgun accidentally shot her in the face. (He was later charged with second-degree assault.) Against the odds, Steltz survived, and rather than "throw a pity party for myself," over the next two years she mastered Braille and the use of a talking computer to graduate from Portland's Franklin High School with straight A's. In 2002 she met Geoffrey Dilger, 27, who lost his sight at 16 after

## BUILDING A NEW FACE

Over four days, specialists crafted Chrissy's prosthesis. Here's how:



**1** Prosthetist David Trainer pours flesh-toned silicone between two plaster molds of Chrissy's face, then bakes it in an oven for two hours.

**2** To ensure her features' perfect placement, Chrissy sat through several fittings a day. "Those three are my angels," she says of her team. "I'm so grateful."

**3** The prosthesis—which Chrissy removes each night—locks onto eight facial magnets that Dr. Dierks implanted in February. Here, Trainer applies liner and lashes around her acrylic eyes.

a tumor on his pituitary gland damaged his optic nerve. The spark was immediate, and in July 2009 the couple welcomed a baby boy—"the love," Steltz says, "of our lives."

After Geoff Jr.'s arrival, Steltz longed for a rebuilt face. "I wanted my baby to be able to recognize his mama," she says. Although her insurance refused to pay for the prosthesis, her case got picked up by Dierks, whose fellow surgeons at Portland's Legacy Emanuel Medical Center first treated Chrissy back in 1999; prosthodontist Larry Over of Eugene, Ore.;

and Florida prosthetist David Trainer. They donated time and thousands of dollars from their own pockets to craft her new face free of charge.

On July 8 Steltz stood before friends and family as the team unveiled the face she'll now show the world. Her little sister Shyanne, 11, born four months after Steltz's accident, couldn't stop staring. As for baby Geoffrey, "he gave me an ear-to-ear grin," Steltz says. Adds Shyanne, who saw him smile: "It was like he was thinking, 'That's my mom—and I wouldn't have her any other way.'" ●