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Rebuilding Jason

The Arizona Republic | 07/07/02 | Michael Chow

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A rainbow forms behind Phoenix police Officer Jason Schechterle while he attends the 14th annual Candlelight Vigil at the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial in Washington, D.C. "I don't want people to stare," he said.



"I can see him."

Suzie Schechterle can't believe the transformation. In front of her, her husband, Phoenix police Officer Jason Schechterle, is wearing a pair of prosthetic ears and a prosthetic nose. His face, ruined by fire, looks so normal. A small image of the Jason that used to be is peeking through.

Robert Barron, who made the prostheses, dips a brush into some paint and swirls and dabs it onto the nose, blending the edges into Jason's scarred skin. Each stroke gives more color, the illusion of texture and the promise of reality to the silicone shapes on Jason's head.

"Do they look good, baby?" Jason asks his wife before looking in the hand-held mirror.

"Oh, honey, they look so good," Suzie says. "They're perfect. They look better than the real ones."

Jason leans into the mirror, examining every inch he can see. This moment is one of those natural highs, like getting a driver's license at 16 or getting married or having a baby. It is about triumph over tragedy and second chances and the hopes of a man with the simple dream of a child: to fit in.

"All these months, I didn't care about ears. I thought, 'I don't need those,' " Jason says. "But, God, that makes a big difference."

Six weeks earlier, on Mother's Day, Jason stands in the same workshop in Virginia, fingering a rubber ear for the first time. He allows himself to wonder, to try to imagine what it would look like on his head.

What would it be like to have ears again? he asks himself. A nose? A normal mouth where the lips aren't pulled askew and the jaw opens wide enough to eat a Jack In The Box Ultimate Cheeseburger? What if he could eat cereal without the milk dribbling down his chin?

He notices the veins painted on the ear in his hand. It looks surprisingly like the real thing.

"I wish I could have this now," Jason says, almost to himself.

Fourteen months after a cab slammed into his patrol car, turning it and him into a fireball, Jason has accepted his injuries, realized that regardless of the face, he is still the same person. **He wears his scars like a badge of courage**, using them to teach others that a different face doesn't make a different person. Identity is so much more than looks. **It's what's inside that makes a man.**

Still, Jason sees the double takes and hears the whispers when he walks by. He looks down at his feet, concentrating on each step as if walking requires such deliberate efforts. He understands. He'd probably look, too. It's just so shocking.

"I'm embarrassed because of the way I look," Jason says. "Some of the people don't see me as a man anymore. They see me as a burned face."

So, he has come here to Virginia, looking for the normalcy that others take for granted. He is here not because he wants to look pretty again but because he wants his mouth to work better, and he wants to make his appearance a little less shocking, especially for his children's friends.

"Society is very shallow," Jason says. "People will stare. I don't want people to stare."

Mixing art and science

Jason sits in what looks like an old barber's chair in the basement of Barron's home. Barron studies his features, looks at some old photos, studies Jason some more. Jason has lost a lot of tissue and his face is much smaller than it used to be. Barron rules out using Jason's dad to model the ears.

"His father's ears are too large for his face," Barron says. "He'd be all ears."

Instead, he decides, Jason will have the ears of his best friend and partner, Officer Bryan Chapman.

"Do you want his nose, too?" Barron asks Jason, looking at the old photos again and then at Chapman. "That's pretty close. That's real close. He's going to look like you."

Barron had a 24-year career disguising spies for the CIA. He forged identity papers, passports and everyday items like theater stubs, address books and receipts for their pockets. He was instrumental in developing the silicone masks that spies wear to get safely in and out of dangerous situations. It was the life or death stuff that movies are made of.

"This is different," Barron says. "You have to fill the void. You have to capture the image of that person."

Since his retirement in 1993, Barron has been mixing art and science to make prosthetic ears, eyes, noses, even hands and masks, for those like Jason who have had disfiguring illnesses or accidents.

"It isn't for cosmetic purposes," Barron says. "Prosthetic devices are medically necessary."

A nose will keep the mucous membranes from drying out and improve Jason's speech. Ears will improve his hearing 20 percent by collecting sound waves and drawing them into the auditory canals. They also will keep out foreign elements and allow Jason to wear glasses again.

And then there are the psychological benefits.

"He will be able to go out in public without the embarrassing stares and unwanted attention he gets because he's different," Barron says. "That's what I'm doing this for."

Anger and withdrawal

There isn't anyone who can give Jason back all that he has lost. No amount of surgeries can make his face look like it did before. Even a silicone mask couldn't capture the exact features that burned off on March 26, 2001.

"He will always be scarred," says Dr. Daniel Caruso, director of the Arizona Burn Center at Maricopa Medical Center. "This is not going to change that. He'll get some cosmetic changes, but if you think he'll look like he did before, no."

Yet, in a society obsessed with appearance, facial reconstruction is a major step for burn survivors.

Dr. Elliott Rose, a New York plastic surgeon whom Jason consulted, says burn survivors go through the same grieving process as if somebody had died. There is anger, withdrawal, depression and, finally, acceptance.

Patients such as Jason ultimately will seek society's acceptance of their appearance in the same way that a child seeks a parent's approval, Rose says. A new look can make them feel whole again.

"He's like you and me," Rose says. "We all want to look our best. We want to look perfect. A society that really focuses on appearance can be cruel."

Rose turns to a computer screen to show Jason what he could look like. He draws a nose and a chin. He erases some of the scarring on the face.

"We will never return the face to what it was," Rose says. "What we're looking for is some semblance of normalcy, an effort to overcome some of that severe disfigurement and give you back some of what we take for granted."

Jason looks at the image unfolding, and there are tears in his eyes.

"It's not like it's a drastic change, but it looks so much better," Jason says.

"I won't look like I did before, and that's fine. I liked the way I looked, and I do miss the way I looked, but I can't say, 'Abracadabra,' and make it come back.

"Give me a mouth that works and give me ears and a nose, and that's happiness."

Dr. Craig Dufresne makes the first incision into the base of Jason's neck at 8:44 a.m. on June 26.

For three hours at Inova Fairfax Hospital in Virginia, Dufresne, a plastic surgeon, carefully separates the skin on Jason's chest and back from the muscle beneath it. He is creating pockets, about 3 inches deep and across the width of the body, to slip four tissue expanders underneath the skin.

Twice a week for the next two months, doctors will fill the expanders with saline to grow new skin to move to Jason's face. Each boomerang-shaped expander could grow to the size of a basketball, if that much skin is needed.

The edges of Jason's skin grafts have pulled together as they scarred. The left side of his neck is tight. It's worst behind the right ear, where the grafts have turned into tight, red ropes of flesh. The contractures have pulled down Jason's lower lip and caused an overbite. His mouth opens only 20 millimeters; a normal mouth opens 40 millimeters.

The new skin should fix that. Jason should be able to close his lips again and speak more clearly. His jaw should open wider. His neck should be unscarred and will move freely.

"If we can get the function, if we can get your lips working better, your neck working better, it'll be better," Dufresne tells Jason.

Better, yes. But still not perfect. Still not enough to keep people from looking. "I can't give him a new face," Dufresne says.

Blending into society

Jason's new ears have veins painted into them. His nose has freckles. It's hard to tell where the prostheses stop and the real skin starts.

Suzie wishes she'd brought Jason's old glasses. She imagines a shock of dark hair on his head. The resemblance is there. Staring back at her, she can see the face she thought had burned away for good.

"He's coming back," Suzie says. "After all these months, I've gotten used to the new Jason and what life had dealt him and what I needed to accept. And now you have him starting to come back and look like the old Jason."

You can see it. It's him."

Not exactly. Not perfect. But pretty close. Close enough for tears.

"That's what was taken away from him," Suzie says, "and now it's going to be given back."

Jason's face is still scarred. His right eye still needs work. When daughter Kiley, 8, sees the prostheses for the first time, she will tell Jason, "You look great," then admit it's weird to see him with ears again. Son Zane, 4, will point out the ears and laugh, saying, "Daddy, you look so funny." But, already this is better.

Jason steps onto an elevator with his new ears and nose, and he is smiling. He walks outside toward the parking structure, and he is smiling. A man walks by and he doesn't look down, and Jason is smiling.

"I already feel more self confident. I feel whole again," Jason says. "The two big parts that were missing aren't missing anymore."

Jason dreams of blending into society again. He imagines a day when the stares are fewer and more perfunctory. That seems possible now.

"If somebody in Phoenix sees me alone on the street and doesn't know who I am, and I have to tell them, 'I'm Jason Schechterle,' I think that would be cool," Jason says.

"Not to be recognized again, that must be something."

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Thanks for posting this -- this article is one of an ongoing series in the Arizona Republic about Jason Schechterle. Powerful stuff.

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It makes my heart ache. SAD. What a neat guy(and his wife), though.

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