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FOLLOW-UP

A New Life for Debbie Fox

BY JEAN LIBMAN BLOCK

Three years ago, this victim of a cruel birth defect turned her back to GH's camera. Now—with a courage that is inspiring others—she is ready to face the world.

Last spring a proud and poised high school girl stood up in front of 400 guests in a hotel ballroom in Chattanooga, Tenn., and belted out the spiritual, "Put Your Hand in the Hand of the Man from Galilee." When she finished, applause thundered through the room and many guests quietly brushed away tears. For the singer was Debbie Diane Fox, born 17 years ago with only a gaping hole where most of her face should have been.

GH readers met Debbie in the April 1970 issue as "The Girl Who Found a Face." That article told how compassionate physicians, concerned teachers, devoted parents and Debbie's own unquenchable courage had worked together to overcome the girl's hideous birth defect. At that time an excruciatingly

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At the time of GH's 1970 article (above right), Debbie had 37 operations behind her, was slated for many more. By now she is beginning to look like the lovely young girl she always was inside. Madeline Apple (above) is Debbie's former teacher and devoted friend. Ann Patton (right) plays the harp while she sings.
A NEW LIFE FOR DEBBIE FOX

continued

delicate, 14-hour long surgical procedure had successfully moved her eyes from the sides of her head to the front of her face. The pioneering surgery, performed by Dr. Milton Edgerton at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, had given Debbie forward vision (before that her eyes had looked off sideways) and made her normal enough in appearance to go to school for the first time.

But that was not her first surgery, by any means. The first was performed on her upper lip, three weeks after her birth, to make feeding easier. Debbie, the last of four children born to Mr. and Mrs. Edward Fox, entered this world with 59 abnormalities of the skull, face, palate and extremities. The family was in shock, but somehow they got through from day to day and Debbie, despite her affliction, managed to thrive. The late Dr. Howard Barnwell, one of the South’s leading plastic surgeons, rebuilt her palate, reshaped her jaw, began realigning her eyelids, while a Chattanooga dentist gradually corrected her teeth.

When Debbie was six, Mrs. Madeline Apple, a home teacher to the handicapped with the Hamilton County Board of Education, began visiting her three times a week, and a telephone hookup linked her to her schoolmates. Her mind was lively and active, although disfigurement kept her close to home. Dr. Barnwell planned to complete corrective surgery by her mid-teens, but he was killed in an automobile accident when Debbie was 12. A surgeon who treated her in Atlanta had to give up his medical practice after suffering a heart attack. Debbie's parents might have accepted their fate at this point, but Mrs. Apple and her boss, Assistant Superintendent Edward Fitch, believed strongly in the girl's future. They saw to it that she got to Dr. Edgerton in Baltimore, one of the world’s foremost plastic surgeons.

The Fox family faced an agonizing decision. If Debbie was going to achieve any kind of normal life, her eyes had to be moved forward. To do this, Dr. Edgerton would have to open her skull and operate on her brain. There would be grave risks. While her parents and teachers tortured themselves with indecision, Debbie made up her own mind.

"Yes," she told Dr. Edgerton, "go ahead."

He did. It was her thirty-seventh operation, the only one that carried a life-and-death balance. When it succeeded, Debbie was famous. Newspapers and magazines wrote about her, mail poured in from all over the world.

And an idea was born.

Madge Apple began thinking about the many children hidden away because of facial malformations. Her work with Debbie and other homebound children had given her a glimpse into that shadowy world of blighted lives. No existing health agency seemed to touch directly on the problem of facial disfigurement. (The March of Dimes provides treatment for cleft palates, but does not serve children who have been born with missing or grossly distorted facial features.)

There followed endless meetings with doctors, lawyers, public-spirited citizens. Before long the Debbie Fox Foundation for the Treatment of Craniofacial Deformities came into existence. It is a tax-exempt public foundation de-
voted to assisting children with major facial deformity, except cleft palates.

John Germ, an energetic Chattanooga engineer and active participant in civic affairs, is now chairman of the foundation. He says, "We are a small group, but you can't believe how much good can be done when hard-working people pinpoint their services toward a particular need."

The foundation's modest endowment—in the low five figures—was launched originally with a $5,000 grant from the Hearst Foundation and is now maintained with gifts of $1 and up from interested supporters. But the group's value is measured not in dollars, but in the enthusiasm of its supporters and the astonishing scope of its efforts.

"When families are in this kind of trouble, we just have to help," says Betty Stocker, mother of two boys in their twenties, who has been busy writing a brochure for the Debbie Fox Foundation. She was recruited by A.J. Koblenz, a former clothing merchant whose ulcer sent him into retirement a few years ago but who's been so busy since then with philanthropic activities that he's often referred to as "Mr. Chattanooga." "This Debbie Fox project is one of the most rewarding things I've ever undertaken," he observes.

As word of the foundation spread, mail began arriving from distraught parents, each letter weighted down with its tale of tragedy, futile search for help and dashed hopes. Foundation volunteers screen the hundreds of letters, write back for further information and medical reports, refer the medical records of afflicted children to doctors and dentists in the Chattanooga area and elsewhere, who review the cases without charge to the already financially burdened parents.

In some instances the foundation pays medical fees for corrective surgery. In others, when doctors' services are donated, it takes care of transportation or works with Blue Cross-Blue Shield to cover deficits. For a nine-year-old Tennessee boy with an eye problem similar to Debbie's but not quite as severe, the foundation paid for two trips to New York and for one hospital stay. The foundation pays the transportation for Debbie and her mother when she makes two trips a year for Dr. Edgerton to continue his repair work. (The eminent doctor sends Debbie no bills.)

Just recently, the foundation announced that it is underwriting a $1,000 prize for a research paper on port wine stain, a facial disfigurement for which there is no satisfactory treatment.

The foundation's first case was a little girl from Kentucky born without a nose and with heavy ridges on her forehead that impinged back into her brain. Her problem was too overwhelming for the doctors in her home area. The foundation, after a careful investigation and medical work-up, arranged for her to go to Baltimore (her church picked up some of the travel expenses) where Dr. Edgerton miraculously fashioned her a nose from surplus skin and cartilage in the facial area.

Soon after, a 14-year-old girl from California was in treatment, a 13-year-old boy from Georgia, a seven-year-old boy from Iowa, a 17-year-old girl from Miami, a 14-year-old boy from Kentucky. The most distant case was continued on page 70
that of Faith Jacobs, a 12-year-old girl who flew 11,000 miles from Bangalore, India, for treatment. Faith's father, a technician with Air India, read the Good Housekeeping article about Debbie and got in touch with the foundation. Faith had been born with a cleft palate which had been corrected in London when she was 18 months old. But after that her teeth grew in so deformed that when she went to school a teacher told her, "Go home and put your head in the sand." Faith never went back to school after that.

Air India provided most of the transportation for Faith and her father, the Debbie Fox Foundation arranged the medical consultations and paid for the dental molds and casts. The final decision was that Faith needed extensive orthodontia and because treatment would stretch over a period of years, a way was found for her to have the work done closer to home, in Bombay, India.

"So far the foundation has worked with about 20 families," reports John Germ, "but many others, after reading the Good Housekeeping article, got directly in touch with Dr. Edgerton or sought out local surgeons for help or referral."

Just recently, a child was born near Chattanooga with only half a face. The foundation immediately went into action. The child was examined by Dr. Don Russell, a distinguished Chattanooga plastic surgeon and board member of the foundation. Treatment procedures are now being formulated. A note from a county health nurse in rural Georgia, reporting on 15 severe cases in need of corrective surgery, was being checked out about the time Debbie was appearing as the star attraction at the recent dinner in Chattanooga to celebrate the foundation's third anniversary.

On that occasion, Debbie shared the spotlight with her surgeon, who is now chairman of the Department of Plastic Surgery at the University of Virginia Medical Center in Charlottesville, Va. Dr. Edgerton spoke movingly of the new hope that can be held out to children with deformities of the face and skull and emphasized the need to begin treatment early before psychological crippling compounds their physical disability. A native of Georgia, Dr. Edgerton has gathered around him at the University of Virginia a special multi-disciplinary team of plastic surgeons, neurosurgeons, ophthalmologists, speech and hearing experts, social workers and others to provide complete medical care for children needing major craniofacial surgery.

As for Debbie herself, she, of course, was delighted that the mayor of Chattanooga proclaimed last March 11 to 17 Debbie Fox Week. She is a little bit awed at all the attention being paid her and quite overwhelmed by the thought that children she will never meet are coming out of the shadows to lead normal lives because of what she underwent. "I can't really believe it," she says, "all the mail and everything that's happened. It's been so wonderful."

Deeply religious, Debbie now goes regularly to the East Soddy, Tenn., Church of God. One of the heaviest burdens of her shut-in days was not being able to join in church activities. Early this year she was deeply shaken by the death of her father from a heart attack. Since then she has drawn even closer than before to her mother, who is still grief stricken. For guidance she often turns to her former teacher, Madge Apple, now Coordinator for Special Education in Hamilton County.

Debbie's happiest hours by far are spent in school. With nine other pupils in Mrs. Geraldine Huckaby's class for the physically handicapped, she keeps up with her own eleventh-grade work in English, algebra, social studies, general business, shorthand. She has averaged close to 100 in her algebra assignments; has mastered sewing, which for a long time was her downfall; and now with the aid of a finger which Dr. Edgerton has constructed as the first step in rebuilding her stub of a right hand, she has learned to knit. In addition, she helps tutor first and second graders in English and Spanish. For a half hour each day she runs the school store, selling pencils, papers and crayons to fellow students, chatting with them, laughing, teasing.

Her plans for the future? They are continued on page 72
Has Your Mirror Become An Enemy?

Truth hurts. And there comes a time when you confront a certain truth in your mirror each morning. Your complexion is obviously growing dryer and older looking. And you can’t help hating your mirror a little for being so honest.

Of course, you’re not alone. Women the world over have experienced the same problem of appearing old before their time. Many fortunate women discovered a secret, a lovely secret you are now able to share with these knowledgeable younger-looking women. Their secret is a unique blend, containing tropical oils and natural moisture, that has become an almost indispensable part of their skin-cherishing ritual.

The remarkable blend, known in the United States as Oil of Olay, was specially created by beauty researchers to smooth, soften and silken your skin. The unusual fluid soothes away the dryness that accentuates those little lines and wrinkles that inevitably make you look older than is necessary. With regular use of this beauty fluid, you will be aware of a welcome change in the appearance and feel of your skin as each day passes.

Oil of Olay moisturizing lotion is a unique formulation that works wonders for your complexion. The abundance of natural oils and moisture in Oil of Olay penetrates the important surface layer of the skin quickly, to work along with nature in maintaining the balance of oil and moisture, an essential element necessary for the youngest, freshest complexion beauty attainable. This is especially important when supplies of nature’s own fluids begin to dwindle with the passing years.

The treasured blend is compatible with the skin and establishes a protective barrier that helps retain your skin’s own moisture, essential for the most dewy, radiant look possible.

Younger-looking women use Oil of Olay faithfully in a skin-pampering ritual at least twice daily for the most beneficial and rapid results. Applied in the morning, the precious blend is a near-perfect base for makeup. Because it is absorbed so quickly, there is no sticky after-feel, and cosmetics never streak or discolor. Applied again at night, Oil of Olay works beautifully for hours as you sleep.

Look for Oil of Olay at drugstores everywhere. You will be surprised how quickly you may again regard your mirror as a friend.

Beauty Hints

Tiny lines can form when you laugh or frown, making you look older than necessary. Soothe on generous amounts of Oil of Olay frequently to ease away the dryness that can make these little lines too noticeable.

Don’t make the mistake of believing that complexion care should be confined to the face. Pamper and protect your throat as well by stroking Oil of Olay® lavishly from the base of your neck to the chinline. The lovely results will soon be apparent.

A NEW LIFE FOR DEBBIE FOX

continued

still uncertain despite the tremendous progress Debbie has made in the past few years.

She faces another half dozen or more operations, most of them minor compared to what she’s already been through. So far she has undergone surgery 45 times.

The latest procedure refined the contours of her nose. Still others will go even further toward giving her the slender, pert nose she’s always wanted. Debbie is determined to have her nose just right, to go with the lovely eyelashes and eyebrows her surgeon has skillfully and painstakingly fashioned for her.

Last year her right hand was grafted to her stomach for three weeks to secure a skin flap for her new finger. Eventually she hopes to have a fully useful hand.

“I think Debbie understands now that she can do almost anything she wants with her life. All sorts of possibilities are open,” says Madge Apple, who has watched the girl’s mind unfold as her face healed into sweet expressiveness.

Next year Debbie finishes high school. One proposal for the year after that is to move with her mother to Charlottesville to train under Dr. Edgerton’s supervision for a career in helping the handicapped.

Another possibility is to stay in Chattanooga and get the advanced training she needs there.

Whatever decision she makes, the future now beckons far more invitingly to Debbie Fox than anyone would have believed possible at the desperate beginning of this courageous young girl’s life.

“People have been good to me,” Debbie says simply.

And that good is being passed on to others through the work of the Debbie Fox Foundation.

Editor’s note: Contributions may be sent to:
The Debbie Fox Foundation for the Treatment of Craniofacial Deformities
P. O. Box 1082
Chattanooga, Tenn. 37401