

Meet the man who gave up his face to save his life

His wife stuck with him: 'His beauty is he is a loving person'

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Donnie Fritts had to make a terrible choice: his face or his life.

That's what doctors told him after he was diagnosed with an extremely rare, aggressive cancer called ameloblastic carcinoma that attacks facial tissue and bones. His only hope to survive was an extreme surgery that would remove his nose, upper lip and palate, part of his forehead and part of his brain.

"He could live without a face, or he could die with his face on," Sharon Fritts, Donnie's [wife](#), told TODAY's Ann Curry Thursday.

Donnie chose life, but survival came with a heavy price. The 12-hour surgery at Emory University Hospital in Atlanta successfully removed his tumors — and left him with a gaping hole in the middle of his face.

'I looked like a monster'

Donnie remembers the first time he saw his own reflection after the surgery; he was so startled he actually jumped back. "I looked terrible, I looked like a monster," he told TODAY. "If I scared my own self, what was I going to do to other people?"

Donnie and Sharon's world shrank. The man who could always make Sharon laugh was now afraid to leave the house. Rather than go out and be stared at, he found refuge in his woodworking shop in the basement, where he'd stay up all night, making birdhouses.

"People say be careful what you pray for," Donnie said. "I prayed for life, and I thought, if this is the best life is going to give me, I have made the wrong decision."

But Donnie had a secret weapon: Sharon, who never stopped believing that he was beautiful. They'd married only a few years before his diagnosis. Many times he told her to leave, to get on with her own life; she always stayed.

"He is so beautiful. I still see the man I saw when we walked down the aisle," Sharon told Curry. "His beauty is he's a giving person, a loving person."

Sharon said she'll always remember how they both laughed through their wedding ceremony, and the look Donnie gave her as they were standing at the altar.

"Some people don't take their vows seriously," Donnie said. "This woman did."

Out of seclusion

After six long years of living in seclusion and wearing a mask in public, Donnie connected with Robert Barron, a former disguise specialist at the CIA, who crafted a prosthetic nose for him. A team of doctors reconstructed his upper lip and palate, enabling him to chew again.

"For the first time this year I was able to sit at the Thanksgiving table," Donnie said. "Here I'm eating away and I look up and all [my family's](#) crying. I'm like, 'What's going on? Let's dig in!'"

Best of all, with Donnie's new face he and Sharon can now walk around in public without being the center of attention. On Wednesday night they arrived in New York City for their TODAY appearance the next morning and strolled through Central Park and Times Square.

"You just feel normal, nobody staring at you, nobody gawking," Donnie said. "It was awesome."

Ameloblastic carcinoma is so rare that there have been only a few dozen recorded cases, and even fewer survivors. Medicare and Medicaid paid for Donnie's initial surgery and for some of his facial rebuilding, but would not cover a new nose for him, because that was deemed cosmetic. With the help of their church and friends in their hometown of Calhoun, Ga., Donnie and Sharon raised the money to pay for his surgeries and prosthetic nose. A team of Washington, D.C.-area doctors led by Dr. Michael Singer rebuilt his face.

Psychological recovery

Donnie's prognosis is excellent, said NBC chief medical editor Dr. Nancy Snyderman. While there's always a chance for cancer to come back, the fact that he's gone seven years cancer-free since his initial surgery is a very good sign.

But recovering from cancer is a psychological battle as well as a physical one, she added, and that's especially true with facial cancer.

"When your face is literally gone, it's horrifying for people on the street who don't know how to approach, don't know what to say," Snyderman told Curry. "So you have to refigure out your place in society. That requires a significant amount of inner [strength](#)."

That's why having Sharon by his side made all the difference for Donnie.

"To see this love that endured, and was able to tackle this as a couple and come out the other side ... the medicine ends up being a small part of the recovery," Snyderman said.

It wasn't always easy, Sharon said. Some days when Donnie told her to leave, she wanted to get up and go.

"And you stayed because?" Ann Curry asked.

"He's mine," Sharon said, holding on to Donnie's hand. "I've got the papers to prove it."

For more information about Robert Barron's prosthetic devices, <http://www.prosthesis.com>. To visit Donnie Fritts' own website, <http://www.donniefritts.com/>.

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Transcript of Interview: Rare cancer leaves man without a face

ANN CURRY, anchor: Now to the story of a man who beat a rare type of cancer, and the woman who stood beside him through it all. NBC 's chief medical editor, Dr. Nancy Snyderman , is here with this story. Nancy , good morning.

Dr. NANCY SNYDERMAN reporting: Hi, Annie. This is an amazing story. Has to do with Donnie Fritts , a man who that when he heard about his tumor he never imagined that life could get any worse than just the diagnosis. But for Donnie it did. He was given a life or death choice that would cost him his face. So a warning this morning, some of the images you're about to see may be a little tough for some of you to watch. It was love at first sight .

Ms. SHARON FRITTS: I looked at and I did like this, and he shook his head no. And then he came over and it just -- it started that way. I was blown away.

SNYDERMAN: Two years after meeting, Sharon Petrie married the love of her life, Donnie Fritts .

Ms. FRITTS: We laughed all through it, but it was beautiful . I'll never forget it. And there's one way he looked at me, as we were standing up front, it's forever imprinted on my mind.

SNYDERMAN: But one year into their marriage, Sharon knew something was wrong.

Ms. FRITTS: Under his eyes just stayed really dark all the time. And he got pale, and he's normally not pale. And I don't know, he had no energy.

SNYDERMAN: The diagnosis? A rare and deadly form of cancer involving the mid-portion of his face. It's call ameloblastic carcinoma. Donnie was faced with a difficult choice.

Ms. FRITTS: He could live without a face, or he could die with his face on.

SNYDERMAN: But for Donnie Fritts there was only one choice, keep living despite the consequences. During the 12-hour surgery, doctors removed part of his forehead, nose, upper palate and parts of his brain and upper lip . After three months of recovery and radiation, Donnie was cancer-free, but survival came with a price.

Ms. FRITTS: We felt like prisoners in our own home. He couldn't leave because he felt very uncomfortable. And you're bound by your four walls.

Mr. DONNIE FRITTS: I look terrible. I look like a monster. If I scared my own self, what am I going to do to other people?

SNYDERMAN: For six years, he and Sharon lived a lonely, dark life.

Mr. FRITTS: After she would go to sleep, and it felt like I was in just this own little world. People say be careful what you pray for. I prayed for life, and I thought, `if this is the best life is going to give me, I have made the wrong decision.'

SNYDERMAN: Then help from an unexpected person, a former CIA disguise specialist. He offered Donnie a new face and some hope.

Mr. FRITTS: He wouldn't let me see the nose the whole time he was painting it and making sure it fit, and the eyebrows and everything. And I was just so anxious. I tried to look in Sharon 's eyes to see if I could see the reflection of my nose in her eyes.

SNYDERMAN: After years of struggling with the destruction of his face and the social isolation, the moment that would allow him to reclaim his existence.

Mr. FRITTS: It was so touching and overwhelming that that night we went out and had dinner. And I hadn't been out for dinner in how many years? Just to blend in and to be able to go in a store and not be gawked at, not be treated any different.

SNYDERMAN: Donnie now had a chance to play a bigger role in the family.

Mr. FRITTS: I wanted to see my kids grow up and get married. We have grandchildren, and I wanted to be around for them.

SNYDERMAN: And for Sharon , whose love remained steadfast throughout everything.

Ms. FRITTS: I think he's beautiful .

Mr. FRITTS: Handsome. She always says beautiful . I said, handsome's for men; beautiful 's for women.

Ms. FRITTS: You're just beautiful .

Mr. FRITTS: Thank you.

CURRY: And Donnie and Sharon Fritts are here this morning exclusively. Good morning to both of you.

Mr. FRITTS: Good morning.

CURRY: You just watched all of what has happened to you put into a story that made it all flash one at a time so fast, and it brought you to tears to watch it.

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, it sure did. It brings back a lot of memories, you know. The pain we went through. It was a long journey. But we made it.

CURRY: You made it. In fact, a man who didn't feel comfortable stepping out of his house is sitting on a couch speaking live on national television.

Mr. FRITTS: And it feels good to feel normal again.

SNYDERMAN: I thought it was so interesting watching that, if you take just the medicine out of it for a moment, you saw those early marriage pictures, and we all know being married you never know what hurdles are going to be out there. But to see this love that endured, and was able to tackle this as a couple, and then come out the other side, I mean, the psychological and social ramifications of this kind of diagnosis and this kind of surgery, the medicine ends up being a small part of the recovery. And kudos to both of them.

CURRY: Well, you know, you just -- you're hearing a medical doctor speak of being impressed by your marriage. And, Sharon , I need to get you in on this because you said to him and you've been saying to him, I understand, consistently, "you are beautiful ."

Ms. FRITTS: He is so beautiful .

Mr. FRITTS: Thank you.

Ms. FRITTS: It's not that -- we know. When you see beauty, I mean to me, I still see the man I saw when we walked down the aisle. I'll never get over that look when he looked over at me and they said he was mine.

CURRY: Hm.

Ms. FRITTS: That's an amazing thing. But his beauty is, he's a giving person, a loving person and he's a genuine person.

CURRY: Is that what got you through this? I mean, I think there are couple listening now, people listening, who struggle with the challenges in their marriages. You know, and they have not faced this rare cancer that threatened so much.

Mr. FRITTS: Some people don't take their vows serious. I think this woman did. For better, for worse, sickness and health.

CURRY: Did you ever doubt it? That she would?

Mr. FRITTS: Well, when I -- I remember the first time I seen myself, the reflection, it actually scared me. And when I seen that image of myself, I didn't know if she would be able to look at me, or my kids or grandkids or family.

SNYDERMAN: You know, when we see each other on the streets, the first thing we do is we connect at individuals by our eyes, by our faces.

Ms. FRITTS: Mm-hmm.

SNYDERMAN: That's the subconscious way of how we interact as human beings. When your face is literally gone, it's horrifying for people on the street who sort of don't know how to approach, don't know what to say. So you have to sort of refigure out your place in society. That requires a significant amount of inner strength.

Ms. FRITTS: Yes.

Mr. FRITTS: Yeah.

Ms. FRITTS: It does. Well, for so many years he wore a mask...

SNYDERMAN: Right.

Ms. FRITTS: ...and you would go into a store or down the street and you would see -- and it's not wrong that they did it, but you would see parents pull their children away because, 'what's wrong with him?'

Mr. FRITTS: Yeah.

CURRY: Hm.

Ms. FRITTS: And that was hard on him.

CURRY: And now what happens -- it hurt then.

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, yeah, it hurts.

CURRY: What happens now?

Ms. FRITTS: Tell her about last night.

CURRY: What happened last night?

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, last night we get into New York -- what a wonderful place this is -- and we walked through Central Park and we're walking by people and they're playing music and stuff,

and you just feel normal walking. I had nobody staring at me, nobody gawking. And then we went down to Times Square .

Ms. FRITTS: Times Square .

Mr. FRITTS: And had a really good time. It was, what, 11:30 at night and the place was packed. It was -- it was awesome.

SNYDERMAN: You got your life back.

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, yeah.

Ms. FRITTS: Yeah.

CURRY: And that's really thanks to this person who helped you create this device that really helped you.

Ms. FRITTS: Mm-hmm.

CURRY: Is there anything you want to say to that person?

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, Robert Barron...

SNYDERMAN: Yeah.

Mr. FRITTS: ...amazing man that built my prosthetic nose, Dr. Michael Singer .

Ms. FRITTS: Dr. Michael Singer.

Mr. FRITTS: Oh, this man, he built my upper palate, and for the first time this year I was able to sit at the Thanksgiving table. Here I'm eating away and I look up and all my family's crying around it. I'm like, `What's going on ? Let's dig in.' But, yeah.

Ms. FRITTS: He said, `eat, eat, quit looking at me.'

CURRY: Well, Donnie , it's great to see this. It's great. Congratulations to you for so many things. To all those doctors, and to your marriage to you, Sharon , for showing us all, and you, Donnie , showing us all what true resilience and love is.

Ms. FRITTS: It has been hard. I mean, it's -- we've had our ups and downs, just like everyone else does.

Mr. FRITTS: Right.

Ms. FRITTS: This is just added to it. And there've been days when he said to leave I wanted to leave. But I'm not going to leave.

CURRY: And you stayed.

SNYDERMAN: Yeah, I bet there were some dark times .

Ms. FRITTS: It was hard.

CURRY: But -- and you stayed because?

Ms. FRITTS: He's mine. I've got the papers to prove it.



Donnie and Sharon Fritts on their wedding day, only a few years before Donnie's facial cancer struck.



Donnie Fritts with his [family](#). Thanks to a reconstructed upper lip and palate, he was able to join them at Thanksgiving dinner again.



Donations from his church and [friends](#) helped Donnie Fritts pay for his prosthetic facial parts.