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Georgia Man Loses Face to Rare Cancer

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By MAUREEN UMEH/myfoxdc

WASHINGTON, D.C. - **WARNING: SOME OF THE VIDEO YOU'LL WATCH IN THIS STORY IS VERY JARRING. PLEASE USE CAUTION IN VIEWING THIS STORY.**

A Calhoun, Georgia man fought a cancer that no one had ever survived, and won. But he paid a horrible price for that battle. The cancer ate away his face.

A team of [doctors](#) from the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland and a prosthetics specialist from

Ashburn, Virginia worked for five years to give Fritts a new face. Now, he has a whole new life.

"That's what I was wanting is to walk out into the public and not be noticed," Fritts says.

His face today is essentially a mask.

Fritts' story of triumph over a killer began seven years ago with what he thought was an excruciating toothache. It was a pain so severe, no medicine would help.

"The pain of it is like holding your arm out and letting a dog eat it inch by inch," said Fritts.

Fourteen doctors told Fritts he had a sinus infection. Eventually one performed a biopsy. Fritts was diagnosed with ameloblastic carcinoma. It's a cancer so rare that just sixteen people in the world have had it, and Fritts is the only known survivor.

[Doctor's](#) gave Fritts a 2-percent chance of survival.

On August 21, 2003, he had his nose, top lip, upper palate, forehead, facial tissue, and part of his brain removed. The disease essentially left Fritts without a face. All that remained was a hole that exposed his mouth and throat. He could hardly talk or even eat.

"I used to have to chew food by taking food and pressing it on the bottom of my teeth and when I would swallow stuff it would go down my nose," he said.

There was also the constant worry of infection, and the emotional toll. Fritts says,

"My mind would wander and I think about, how is my wife going to accept me after losing my face? How are my kids and grandkids gonna accept me? How's the world gonna accept it?" Fritts remembered.

It was a painful reality for Fritts, who admits falling into depression. He turned to faith and his wife, Sharon.

"When I look at him, I see that man who walked down the aisle with me," said his wife.

It was during Fritts' chemotherapy at Hope Lodge at Emory Hospital in Atlanta that Sharon learned about Robert Barron. He's a prosthetic specialist from Ashburn, Virginia. Barron had a unique story of his own.

For 24 years, he worked for the Central Intelligence Agency, the CIA, specializing in altering identities for some of the highest level agents in the program.

"Agents depended on the realism of that disguise to keep them alive," Barron said.

He now uses his skills to help people disfigured by disease, trauma or congenital defects.

"If you could change someone's identity," Barron said, "then you could give that identity back to that individual. I said Donnie, yes, I can help you, but it's not just going to be me. It's going to be a team of doctors."

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It's taken more than 20 surgeries at NIH in Bethesda, but the team has finally given Fritts a new face. Barron designed a prosthetic nose. One doctor embedded titanium screws in Fritts' forehead to basically hold up his face.

Another doctor designed the device that allows him to chew and swallow, and a third doctor performed the multiple surgeries needed to put everything together.

"It's such a good feeling to give somebody back the quality of life they were used to," Barron said.

Now, Fritts can do the simple but most precious things, like share a kiss with his wife.

"He's whole again," Sharon said. "It's amazing.

"I don't look like I used to look, but I feel comfortable now," Fritts said.

Fritts has been cancer-free for five years. Because most of his surgeries have been considered cosmetic, insurance hasn't covered the cost. Anonymous donors have made it all possible, and Bethesda Marriott Suites has also provided services.

To find out more about Donnie's progress, follow this link to his personal website.

For more on Robert Barron and his endeavors, follow this link.

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Sharoll Moses (Donnie & Sharon Fritt's Daughter)

They have been through so much!!! They've inspired me in so many ways!! I hate that they had to go through all this, but I'm glad I have been able to be here so I could learn and understand.... it seems so unbelievable...sad, but true!!! What's worse is that there are so many cruel people out there that just don't understand, and in their shallowness are rude and just plain mean....but more than that- there are people who have been absolutely great!! Lots of prayer and support have been there for them and our whole family these past 6 years! I really enjoyed watching this and thank you guys on behalf of our family! God bless you guys!!! O, and by the way...to comment on what he said... his kids and grandkids except and love them both very... very much!!! Once again thanks!! =)

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Guest

Donnie and Sharon are amazing people. I'm so glad to see him whole again! They taught me to keep the faith and persevere no matter what the circumstance. I hope and pray things get easier for them now.

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Guest

Thank you for posting this story!! Donnie and I have been living it for a long time and hope the story helps someone!

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Christine

What a beautiful story!! I hope showing him on TV will inspire others to contact Robert Barron. I've seen his work in another tv story: a police who were in terrible car crash in Arizona and was so impressed by his willingness to help people like Donnie and that police. So glad to hear he is cancer free. God Bless Robert Barron and his work.

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mike

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