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Saving face

Surgery corrects vivid reminders of years of abuse



Anesthesiologist Emil Polstad at the Utah Surgical Center in West Valley City rearsures Deb Dale before she goes into surgery to repair her nose.

Story by Lois M. Collins / Photos by Scott G. Winterton
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For years, Deb Dale carried the memory of domestic violence on her face. Every time she looked in the mirror, she saw it in her crooked nose. She felt it in each ragged breath she took, her airways obstructed by the damage from being punched and slapped.

These days, she has a fresh outlook on life. She's breathing easier, living freer and looking better, she says. All because of a program called "Face to Face" and a man named Dr. Steven Mobley, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon at the University of Utah.

"Face to Face" is a national program run by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, in cooperation with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the umbrella group for most battered women shelters in the United States. The program screens applicants, then refers them to participating local surgeons like Mobley who have volunteered to



Dr. Steven Mobley, a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon at the University of Utah, draws out the way he hopes to transform Deb Dale's nose.

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repair facial damage at no cost to the patient.

After Mobley met Dale and saw that he could, indeed, help her, he asked the Utah Surgical Center to donate its facility and time for the actual operation. The anesthesiologist also donated his time in what has become a life-altering event for Dale.

The road for Dale from an abusive home life to the operating room has been a long and rocky one.

Dale, 44, was in two abusive relationships. In the first, she says, her husband broke her nose and her jaw. She thought her second marriage was going to be just the opposite, because at first things were really good, she says.

But before long, it, too, became abusive. "With domestic violence you tend to fall right back into it," she says sadly. "You need to remove yourself from the situation for a long period of time."

While Mobley was establishing his medical practice in Utah, Dale was serving time on a charge of "attempted robbery after the fact." Her then-husband stole drugs from a pharmacy.

She says prosecutors never claimed she knew that he was going to steal as she sat outside in the car, but she got in

serious trouble because she didn't turn him in afterward, when she learned what he'd done. She was incarcerated for almost a year, then placed on parole, which she has completed.

Incarceration sounds like a bad thing, but Dale believes it helped save her life. First, it put her out of reach of his fists. And she had plenty of time to think about what had become of her life and why she had become a frightened woman who put up with abuse. She didn't like either the answers she found or herself very much.

"My criminal history stemmed from domestic violence and my low self-esteem," she says. "I had gotten to the point where I felt I was nobody," which she believes also helps explain why she, for a time, used drugs while she was being abused. "I wanted to numb myself," she adds.

Her mother died when Deb was 18, after battling cancer three different times during Dale's childhood.

"I became a classic stuffer. I forever stuffed my pain. I never stuffed my pain," Dale says. "And with the domestic violence, I didn't want anyone to know what I was going through. I felt like such an idiot, especially the second time. The first thing anyone asks is why you put up with it. They have no idea how many times I tried to walk away. They have no idea how hard it is to get out of this situation. Through

therapy, I learned it was all associated with each other." Out of jail, she dug in to become a model parolee, a better mom to her two now-grown sons, to mend fences within her extended family. One relative had told her to "come back when you get your life straightened out. I love you and I can't bear to watch this," Dale remembers.

She went to counseling. Now she's also free of drugs. When she applied to Face to Face, she says the counselor there said her story — even the incarceration and substance abuse — is not terribly unusual for victims of domestic violence. But the program is adamant that a woman must be out of the abusive situation and well on the road to recovering both physically and emotionally before one of its surgeons will intervene to repair a battered face. Any woman seeking the program's help is required to meet with a domestic violence counselor in her area, as well, for an assessment.

Such counselors are all too familiar with the statistics and the devastation. More than 5 million women a year are

affected by domestic violence in the United States — more than a million of them so seriously they require medical attention. And for three-fourths of the women, the abuse includes battering to the face and head.

Women also tend to put up with it, in part because those who dare leave are at 75 percent greater risk of serious injury or death than those who stay, according to the National Domestic Violence Project.

Many who eventually leave violent relationships still carry the scars on their faces for life. "That's where physicians like Mobley come in.

Mobley, who grew up in Texas, and his wife, Britta, were married in 1994. They now have a son, Max, 4½, and a baby, 4-month-old Paxton. And as they count their blessings, Mobley wants to bless others, he says. "I know it sounds like a cliché, but I make a darned good living and with it comes a sense of social responsibility. This is a nice organization to get involved in, and we could do more if more patients knew about it. It's not an

inconvenience in the big picture of a busy medical practice to stop and do some charity care.

"And these have all been nice, nice individuals who are getting their lives back on track," he says of the handful of women whose faces he's mended through the program so far. "I am one of the last steps in their recovery. It is costly, but I feel fortunate to do what I do."

In the three years he's been practicing in Utah — where he accepted a job because he wanted to work in an academic environment — he's done about two of the donated surgeries a year. It's something he knows he wanted to do even as he was training to be a facial plastic and reconstructive surgeon.

In the half-dozen women he has treated after domestic violence, he's seen definite patterns, he said. The injuries are often similar to Dale's: noses broken and twisted, some sort of irregularities on the outside. And "all of the women want to breathe normally," something that has become hard for them after being punched in the face.

In late August, he met with Dale to talk about what he'd be doing. A few days later, she checked in for a surgery that lasted several hours. Mobley cleaned out the internal, damaged structure of the nose to solve her breathing problems. And because she had a slight

hook on the end of her nose, he made some subtle modifications to give it a more pleasing line, while he was at it.

The next morning, she went to his office to have the packing removed. A week later the splints came out. By the end of the second week, most of the pain was behind her, and she was "nicely along in recovery," Mobley says, although her face was still spongy and swollen. Subtle swelling may last as long as two months in facial reconstruction, he adds.

When she told him, hesitantly, that she had been jailed, it didn't faze him. Her past, he says, was less important to him than what kind of life she planned to build for her future.

Since the surgery, she's started a new job and is doing well, she says. One of the first things Dale noticed a few days after surgery was what was missing — her perpetual sinus headache. "And I'm breathing better, better, better," she exclaims. She likes the way it looks, too.

Sleep, she says, used to be her refuge, and she dreaded waking up. Nowadays, she says, morning brings a smile to her lips. "It's tremendous how different it looks. It's amazing. And I feel better about my life every single day."

Please see PLEASE: The number to call for Face to Face is 1-800-842-4546. E-MAIL: info@face2face.com



Left, Dr. Steven Mobley prepares to remove the gauze packing from Dale's nose the day after surgery. Above, Dale sits at her West Valley home a few weeks after the surgery. She says since surgery, she's started a new job and is doing well — and now she can literally breathe easier through her repaired nose. She likes the way it looks, too.