



A Face for Me

How faith and
courage triumphed over
disfigurement and despair...
an inspiring autobiography

by **Debbie Diane Fox**
with **Jean Libman Block**



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by **Debbie Diane Fox** with
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Above:
Debbie Fox and her mother, Sarah Fox
center:
Debbie's teacher, Madeline Apple
Below:
Debbie's surgeon, Milton T. Edgerton, M.D.

WOMEN'S NEWS

Debbie Fox: The Girl From Soddy Who Found A Face

By PATTI BENTON STEPHENSON

"I never saw my face until I was eight years old . . . One day I found a hand mirror in the bathroom . . . When I saw my face, I could feel a terrible scream come tearing out of my throat . . ."

Chattanoogaans have read about Debbie Diane Fox, the little girl from Soddy who was born without a face, in this newspaper before. Now, in a book entitled *A Face For Me*, Debbie tells her own story, from the first agonizing sight of her disfigurement, through endless, critical operations, to the present.

Debbie was the fourth child of Sarah and Edward Fox, born on December 31, 1955, in Chattanooga's Currey Clinic. "The hospital records reported that I had 59 abnormalities of the face, skull, palate and limbs, including my missing right hand and bands of tight fibrous tissue around my left and right thighs," Debbie writes. Her appearance was so horrifying that Debbie's mother was not allowed to see her until she was three weeks old.

Debbie's first weeks on earth were spent in an incubator. "Since my mouth was too messed up for a bottle," Debbie explains, she was fed with a tiny medicine dropper. The very first week she underwent corrective surgery — the first of 58 operations she has had so far.

The doctors were mystified by what had caused Debbie's development to go so awry. Finally they sent her home and her parents resigned themselves to raising their youngest daughter as a hidden child — secluded from outside eyes.

Though Debbie grew up knowing her right hand "wasn't right," it wasn't until the episode with the mirror at age eight that Debbie realized the extent of her deformity. "So that was what I looked like!" she writes. "That was why I couldn't play with the other children, go to school, go to church, run into the store to buy candy or ice cream. All those things had been forbidden to me. Because of my hand, I had always thought. Now I knew. I was ugly. I was horrible. I wasn't fit to look at."

The fact that Debbie had an IQ of 120 only made her physical prison harder to bear. In an effort to give her a chance for an education, a visiting teacher, Mrs. Madeline Apple, was sent to teach Debbie at home.

Though the shock of seeing Debbie's twisted face unnerved her at first, Mrs. Apple was determined to teach her. But with her eyes facing out from the sides of her head, instead of straight ahead, Debbie struggled to learn to read and write. With determination and encouragement from her family and Mrs. Apple, she

learned to write with her left hand (though she was naturally right-handed) and twist her head around so she could follow the letters with her stronger right eye. Reading was accomplished by holding the book beside her instead of in front.

By the time Debbie reached third-grade level, a telephone connecting her to the third-grade class at Soddy Elementary was installed in the Fox home. When some Hamilton County School Board officials arrived for a picture with the Foxes and the new phone, Debbie's mother gently turned her away from the camera.

"I think it was from that moment, on the porch of my house, when all the others looked forward and I looked backward, that I made up my mind that I was going to get my face fixed, no matter what," Debbie writes.

Sprinkled throughout her book are references to the strong religious faith that sustained Debbie and her family. Staunch followers of the Church of God, the Foxes had a simple belief that "God would not allow a little girl to be born without a face unless he had a good reason." Determined that God wanted her to have a new face in order to share "the miracle" with others, Debbie started the long journey toward her dream.

The first plastic surgeon to do reconstructive work on Debbie's face was Dr. Howard Barnwell of Chattanooga. After his death in an automobile accident, the Foxes traveled to Atlanta, Debbie's first trip away from home, where a young doctor agreed to help her. Another setback came when he also died unexpectedly from a heart attack.

Finally, the Foxes were led to Dr. Milton Edgerton, a renowned plastic surgeon at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. During the long weeks of evaluation and tests, Debbie also endured cruel taunts from other children on the ward. Though a psychological exam revealed that Debbie "was tense and depressed at the prospect of more surgery," she was determined to continue with her quest for a new face, and to stop those cruel jeers forever.

A few months later, on June 9, 1969, Debbie entered the hospital for the most major operation yet — one so delicate and critical that "there were no books to read about it," said Dr. Edgerton. During 13 hours of non-stop surgery, Dr. Edgerton and a team of specialists actually remodeled Debbie's skull, relocated her brain, and moved her eyes more than two inches toward the center of her face. With surplus skin they fashioned the beginnings of a nose where only a hole had been before.

— When the news of the pioneering operation and Debbie's survival reached the world's ears, the 13-year-old girl from Soddy, Tenn., found herself buried under a torrent of mail, including a letter from then-president Richard Nixon. Newspapers carried her story and ministers preached sermons about her courage.

On the day Dr. Edgerton removed her bandages, a nurse gave Debbie a mirror. Though her face was black-and-blue and still misshapen, to Debbie it was beautiful. "For the first time I was able to see my whole face all at once," she writes.

Back home in Soddy Debbie got another long-awaited wish: to go to real school. Mrs. Apple helped set up the first special education class in Hamilton County for Debbie and other handicapped children in the area.

Though Debbie thrived on her lessons, the years of being locked away from other children had taken its toll on her social development. Used to being the center of attention, she resorted to "telling tales" to gain the

limelight. Soon, however, a patient teacher and time gradually freed her from "the little demon inside me" and Debbie blended right in with her other classmates.

With contributions sent in from well-wishers, the Foxes established the Debbie Fox Foundation to aid other children with cranio-facial disorders. As the years passed, Debbie's operations continued, one right after the other, to rebuild her nose, restructure her mouth so that she could speak more clearly, and construct fingers for her right hand using some of her toes.

With each operation, she writes, Debbie's appearance improved. "The mirror was no longer my enemy — it had become my friend," she reports. Though she suffered the loss of her father in 1973, Debbie was able to share her story for the first time in public before the large audience at the Debbie Fox Foundation banquet.

Debbie continued to catch up with life during the next few years. She learned to drive a car and proudly donned cap and gown to

graduate with the Soddy-Daisy High School senior class. Though more surgery is still necessary, today Debbie lives a quiet, happy life at home with her mother, looking forward to the future.

"If I have a career, I want it to be visible. I want to show my face," Debbie writes. "Showing it will honor the doctors who gave me my face. It will honor my parents, who believed, even in the darkest days, that I would be made whole. It will please me because I've had too much of hiding in my life.

"Most important, it will give meaning to my long search for a face. It will tell those who look at me that the handicapped and the deformed must not be kept locked away from view.

"We must come out, into the mainstream of daily life. . . Whatever path I choose, I know that God would want me to serve and give to others because, as I wrote years ago in one of my poems: 'This has been done for me, and I have been set free.' "

After 58 operations to correct the 59 facial abnormalities she was born with, Debbie Fox tells her own story in a new book, 'A Face For Me'