

Tearful meeting for pair forever linked by face transplant

November 10 2017, by Kyle Potter



Lilly Ross, right, reacts as she talks with face transplant recipient Andy Sandness during their first meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Ross had fretted before the meeting, fearful of the certain reminders of her husband, who took his own life. But her stress quickly melted away—without Calen's eyes, forehead or strong cheeks, Sandness didn't look like him, she told herself. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Standing in a stately Mayo Clinic library, Lilly Ross reached out and

touched the face of a stranger, prodding the rosy cheeks and eyeing the hairless gap in a chin she once had known so well.

"That's why he always grew it so long, so he could try to mesh it together on the chin," she told Andy Sandness, as he shut his eyes and braced for the tickle of her touch on new nerve endings in the face that had been her husband's.

Sixteen months after transplant surgery gave Sandness the face that had belonged to Calen "Rudy" Ross, he met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's visage to a man who lived nearly a decade without one.

The two came together last month in a meeting arranged by the Mayo Clinic, the same place where Sandness underwent a 56-hour surgery that was the clinic's first such transplant. With her toddler Leonard in tow, Ross strode toward Sandness, tears welling in her eyes as they tightly embraced.

Ross had fretted before the meeting, fearful of the certain reminders of her husband, who took his own life. But her stress quickly melted away—without Calen's eyes, forehead or strong cheeks, Sandness didn't look like him, she told herself.

Instead, she saw a man whose life had changed through her husband's gift, newly confident after 10 years of hiding from mirrors and staring eyes.



Lilly Ross, right, feels the beard of face transplant recipient Andy Sandness during their meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Sixteen months after surgery gave Sandness the face that once belonged to Calen "Rudy" Ross, Sandness met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's face to him, who lived nearly a decade without one. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

"It made me proud," Ross said of the 32-year-old Sandness. "The way Rudy saw himself ... he didn't see himself like that."

Sandness and Calen Ross lived lives full of hunting, fishing and exploring the outdoors before their struggles consumed them, 10 years and hundreds of miles apart.

Sandness put a rifle below his chin in late 2006 in his native Wyoming and pulled the trigger, destroying most of his face. Ross shot himself and

died in southwestern Minnesota a decade later.

By then, Sandness had receded from contact with the outside world, ashamed of his injuries—surgeries to rebuild his face had left him a quarter-sized mouth, and his prosthetic nose frequently fell off.



Lilly Ross, right, holds her 17-month-old son Leonard as she talks with face transplant recipient Andy Sandness, left, after their first meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Ross consented to the face transplant from her husband, despite her hesitation about someday seeing Rudy's face on a stranger. Eight months pregnant at the time, she said one reason to go forward was that she wanted the couple's child to one day understand what his father did to help others. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

Hope first came in 2012 when the Mayo Clinic started exploring a face transplant program and again in early 2016 when he was wait-listed for the procedure.

Ross already had agreed to donate her husband's lungs, kidneys and other organs to patients. Then LifeSource, a Midwestern nonprofit organization that facilitates organ and tissue donations, broached the idea of a donation for a man awaiting a face transplant at the clinic.

Ross and Sandness' ages, blood type, skin color and facial structure were such a near-perfect match that Sandness' surgeon, Dr. Samir Mardini, said the two men could have been cousins.

Ross consented, despite her hesitation about someday seeing her husband's face on a stranger. Eight months pregnant at the time, she said one reason to go forward was that she wanted the couple's child to one day understand what his father did to help others.



Lilly Ross, left, hugs face transplant recipient Andy Sandness as they first meet in a library at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Sixteen months after transplant surgery gave Sandness the face that once

belonged to her husband, Calen "Rudy" Ross, he met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's face to a man who lived nearly a decade without one. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

More than a year after a surgery that took a team of more than 60 medical professionals, Sandness is finding a groove in everyday life while still treasuring the simple tasks he lost for 10 years, such as chewing a piece of pizza.

He's been promoted in his work as an oilfield electrician and is expanding his world while still prizing the anonymity that comes with a normal face.

"I wouldn't go out in public. I hated going into bigger cities," he said. "And now I'm just really spreading my wings and doing the things I missed out on—going out to restaurants and eating, going dancing."

Life with a transplanted face takes work, every day. Sandness is on a daily regimen of anti-rejection medication. He's constantly working to retrain his nerves to operate in sync with his new face, giving himself facial massages and striving to improve his speech by running through the alphabet while driving or showering.



Lilly Ross wipes a tear from her eye as she talks about her deceased husband, Calen "Rudy" Ross, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. For Ross, just meeting face transplant recipient Andy Sandness felt like a huge release—a way to get past a year filled with grieving, funeral planning, childbirth and gut-wrenching decisions about organ donations from her husband. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

"I wanted to show you that your gift will not be wasted," Sandness told Ross.

Mardini and the rest of Sandness' medical team have delighted in seeing their patient and friend open up since the procedure, going out of his way to talk with strangers whose gaze he once hid from.

"It turns out Andy is not as much of an introvert as we thought," Mardini said. "He's enjoying these times, where he's missed out on 10 years of his life."

Ross and Sandness say they feel like family now. They plan to forge a stronger connection, and Sandness said he'll contribute to a trust fund for Leonard's education.



Lilly Ross, left, shows family photos to face transplant recipient Andy Sandness after meeting at a library at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. The meeting was arranged by the hospital, where Sandness underwent a 56-hour surgery that was the clinic's first such transplant. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

On the day of their meeting, the boy stared curiously at Sandness at first. But later, he walked over and waved to be picked up. Sandness happily obliged.

For Ross, just meeting Sandness felt like a huge release—a way to get past a year filled with grieving, funeral planning, childbirth and gut-wrenching decisions about organ donations.

"Meeting Andy, it has finally given me closure," she said, her voice choking as it trailed off. "Everything happened so fast."



Lilly Ross, left, shows her family photos to Andy Sandness during their meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Sixteen months after transplant surgery gave Sandness the face that once belonged to Ross' husband, Calen "Rudy" Ross, he met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's face to a man who lived nearly a decade without one. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



This combination of photos provided by Andy Sandness and Lilly Ross shows Sandness, left, before his injuries in 2006 and Lilly's husband, Calen "Rudy" Ross. Sandness and Calen Ross lived lives full of hunting, fishing and exploring the outdoors before their struggles consumed them, 10 years and hundreds of miles apart. (Courtesy Andy Sandness, Lilly Ross via AP)



Face transplant recipient Andy Sandness speaks during an interview Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn. Life with a transplanted face takes work, every day. Sandness is on a daily regimen of anti-rejection medication. He's constantly working to retrain his nerves to operate in sync with his new face, giving himself facial massages and striving to improve his speech by running through the alphabet while driving or showering. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



Lilly Ross speaks during an interview Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Sixteen months after transplant surgery gave Andy Sandness the face that once belonged to Ross' husband Calen "Rudy" Ross, he met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's face to a man who lived nearly a decade without one. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



Andy Sandness, left, gets a hug from Dr. Samir Mardini at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Mardini led a 56-hour transplant surgery to give Sandness the face that once belonged to Calen "Rudy" Ross. Ross and Sandness' ages, blood type, skin color and facial structure were such a near-perfect match that Mardini said the two men could have been cousins. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



Lilly Ross, left, talks with Andy Sandness after meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Sixteen months after transplant surgery gave Sandness the face that once belonged to Calen "Rudy" Ross, he met the woman who had agreed to donate her high school sweetheart's face to a man who lived nearly a decade without one. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



Face transplant recipient Andy Sandness holds 17-month-old Leonard Ross after meeting at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Leonard's mother, Lilly, and Sandness say they plan to forge a stronger connection, and Sandness said he'll contribute to a trust fund for Leonard's education. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)



Face transplant recipient Andy Sandness talks with 17-month-old Leonard Ross as they look out a window at the Mayo Clinic, Friday, Oct. 27, 2017, in Rochester, Minn. Lilly Ross consented to the face transplant from her husband, despite her hesitation about someday seeing Rudy's face on a stranger. Eight months pregnant at the time, she said one reason to go forward was that she wanted the couple's child to one day understand what his father did to help others. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

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