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Connections



Photo courtesy of Gari Carter



Photo courtesy of Dr. Milton T. Edgerton



Times photo - V. JANE WINDSOR

BEFORE, DURING, AFTER

Gari Carter's "first" face was beautiful. But it was mangled in a car accident 13 years ago, requiring seven surgeries, including one in May 1983 in which her lips were reconstructed. Gari's "second" face still shows evidence of scars, but she feels lucky just to be alive.



Times photo - V. JANE WINDSOR

A RETURN TO BEAUTY

■ Thirteen years ago, Gari Carter's face was perfect and her life was a mess. Then came the car accident that scarred her face and healed her life.

By JEANNE MALMGREN
Times Staff Writer

CRYSTAL BEACH

All over Gari Carter's house are photos. The faces of a woman and her loved ones.

They peer out from the frames, smiling behind glass, frozen in moments both mundane and ceremonial.

In her office, on the wall by her computer, there's a faded black-and-white wedding portrait of a slim young woman in a satin dress and lace mantilla. Other photos show her as a child with her parents, standing on rocks at the Maryland shore.

Nearby, now a grown woman, she is shaking hands with President Kennedy in the Rose Garden. There are several shots of her children, a boy and a girl who is a delicate miniature of her mother.

Every photograph shows the artful

symmetry of Gari's face — her first face, she calls it.

On a marble-topped table in the living room, smaller photos shoulder up against each other. Gari's son in his Cub Scout uniform. Her daughter, regal in her debutante gown. Gari and the children on a whitewashed wall in Greece. Gari and her mother on her mother's 70th birthday.

In the master bedroom, the photos are from the past couple of years. Gari's son at the airport, returning from a year abroad. Molly the cat. Gari and her fiancé on vacation out West. Gari and the kids grouped around a tree.

In these pictures, Gari's face looks different. Something has changed, and it's not just the passing of years.

The jawline has a new silhouette. The nose. The lips. The chin.

Nothing is quite the same.

This is Gari's second face, the one the surgeons created for her after the accident that divided her life down the middle.



She has told the story probably hundreds of times.

The snowstorm. The winding country road. The other car streaking toward them, head-on, in their lane. Thinking, at the last second, that it didn't matter what happened to her, she just wanted her son to live.

Then... 11-year-old Sullivan shaking her, trying to use his Cub Scout CPR on what was left of her face. Feeling the snow swirl in the air around her while she lay trapped in the wreckage.

The horrifying metal-on-metal sound as the Jaws of Life ripped the car apart, trying to free her. On a stretcher, in the ambulance, paramedics ripping open the legs of her pants.

It happened on a winter morning in 1982, near the Carters' home in Virginia. Gari was in the midst of a contentious divorce. Her daughter, Caroline, had decided to live with her father. Gari was worried about the shop she owned, wondering whether she could support herself and her son.

In an instant, things went from bad to worse.

Young Sully came through the crash unhurt, but his mother wasn't so lucky.

The impact pushed the car's steering wheel up into her chin with deadly force, splitting her face open from ear to ear, all the way up to her eye sockets. Her mouth and nose were obliterated.

The engine block shoved into her legs, breaking both and nearly severing the right one.

The injuries were horrific. But Gari didn't die.

She began what she now calls her second life.

Please see RETURN 30



Times photo — V. JANE WINDSOFF

THE FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT: Gari Carter takes daily power walks in her Crystal Beach neighborhood in Pinellas County. She has to wear SPF 40 sunscreen to protect her grafted skin.

IN PERSON

Gari Carter will speak and sign copies of her book, *Healing Myself*, at these Barnes & Noble bookstores:

- 7 p.m. today, 122 Brandon Town Center, Brandon
- 7 p.m. Thursday, 2501 Tyrone Blvd., St. Petersburg
- 7 p.m. Dec. 13, 213 N. Dale Mabry, Tampa

A RETURN TO BEAUTY

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Today, in her stilt home near the Gulf of Mexico, Gari Carter, 54, lives serenely.

Beyond the sliding glass doors in back is a wall of green: a nature preserve populated by wading birds, armadillos and raccoons that regularly visit Gari's deck for a snack.

Her fiancé, Dunedin optometrist Steve Heyman, is always close at hand. The house is full of colorful relics from their travels: an Indonesian batik over the fireplace; carved masks from Java on the wall; a Tibetan bowl.

The children, both of whom live in Virginia and are in their 20s, fly down for holidays. Gari has a faithful array of friends.

And there's her book.

Published a year ago by Hampton Roads, a small Virginia press, *Healing Myself* is the saga of Gari's recovery. She hopes the book will help others who are struggling to overcome tragedy.

"When I was going through this, I looked for a hero, somebody who could help me through all this," she says. "I never could find it in one person. So I hope this book can be that hero for other people."

Since February, she's been on the road several weekends a month, speaking at bookstores, schools, churches and hospitals.

Her voice, fueled by her one remaining vocal cord and honed by speech therapists, is husky and soft. There's a wide streak of white in her chestnut hair, caused by the shock of the accident. She dresses in a rainbow of vibrant colors.

Gari speaks with the calm and confidence of someone who endured the worst and has nothing to fear. She talks about how grateful she is for the accident and the changes it wrought.

"It went from being the worst thing in my life to the best," she likes to say.

Her friend Robin Saenger, a Tarpon Springs artist, is helping Gari promote the book.

"It shows people what kind of obstacles they can overcome," Saenger says. "People are so tied in to their physical selves, their bodies, that it's upsetting to lose part of that. But Gari shows people they're more than just how they look. She teaches them to see the beauty inside. It sounds corny, but it's true."

It's all there in the book. Every painful detail.

Gari spent weeks and months in the solitude of her home office, reliving the past decade. As she wrote, she sobbed, remembering the multiple operations, the shattered self-image, the fear. The whole enormity of what happened to her.

"Her injuries were at the very severe level," says Dr. Robert Chuong, a maxillofacial surgeon



who worked on the team that rebuilt Gari's face at the University of Virginia. Chuong since has moved to a private practice in St. Petersburg.

Gari was an unusual patient, Chuong recalls. "She was very intelligent and articulate, very focused on her healing."

Life in the months after the accident was a series of firsts.

First sentence. First step. First solo trip to the bathroom. First shower. First outing. First time above 100 pounds.

Until Gari could speak, she had to use a rub-off slate to communicate. Her memory had been jarred. Even reading simple sentences was difficult.

Perhaps hardest was seeing the look in people's eyes when they walked into her hospital room. Her face was "raw hamburger," she recalls.

Caroline fainted the first time she saw her mother after the accident. Friends broke down in tears or turned away, speechless.

The nurses wouldn't give Gari a mirror for weeks.

Nursed by her mother, Mai West, her son and a round robin of friends, Gari slowly came back to life. One by one, she remastered basic skills such as walking, eating and drinking.

Most of all, there was the reconstruction of her face. The laborious process began as soon as the stitches from the emergency room had healed.

It spanned 10 years and seven surgeries. Her jaw was refractured in order to get it to line up properly. New gum tissue was created from a graft of skin from her abdomen. Her few remaining shattered teeth were ground down; metal alloy false teeth were made.

New lips were created from Gari's palate and sewn in place. One of her ribs was removed; it gave shape to her new nose. The surgeons built a new chin. Repair work was done on her cheeks and around the broken bones near her eyes.

Each operation sent her back to bed for weeks, her face swathed in bandages, her mouth stuffed with gauze, a towel pinned around her neck to catch the drool.

The pain was unrelenting, despite the codeine.

"It was really awful, just unreal," Gari says. She likens the symphony of hurts to "very choppy, ugly music. Like Mahler."

Midway through her surgeries, Gari discovered a set of pain-control tapes from the Monroe Institute, a brain research organization in Vir-

ginia. They used soothing voices and tones of different frequencies in each ear, designed to be heard on stereo headphones.

The tapes became her salvation. She listened to them before, during and after surgery, with her doctors' blessing. Only topical anesthetic and occasional Demerol had to be used during her last few operations — and no pain medication afterward.

The metamorphosis was like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis.

As the doctors slowly repaired her outside, Gari was working on the inside. She began to see her enforced solitude as a unique opportunity.

"All that time when I couldn't read, couldn't talk, I had a lot of time to think about who I really wanted to be. What I didn't like about my first personality and what I wanted to change."

She resolved to be a more loving, easygoing person, someone not so focused on outer appearances.

"The meaning of life to me before the accident was totally based on how people dressed, how they looked," she recalls. "Now, in my second life, my way of looking at things is so different."

What's important to her now is preserving the sense of well being she painstakingly re-created from the wreckage of her accident.

"I really crave and cherish living my life in harmony now," she says. "Because I know how hard-won it was."

She has become a collector of quotations, writing them down in a journal and putting a new one each day on the blackboard in her office.

One of her favorites was given to her by a friend while she was in the hospital:

What has happened has happened. What I am going through I shall rise above.

And what will come I will meet with courage.

Every morning, Gari and Steve meditate together; then she heads out for a power walk. After that, there's yoga and physical therapy stretches. She can't skip the routine for even one day, or her body starts hurting.

Each time Gari lectures, Steve is there in the front row.

"I think I've memorized everything she says, but I love it," he says with obvious affection. "She's a very alive person who has a sparkle that just grabs you."

He is unperturbed by Gari's face.

"If I really concentrate on her chin, I can see there are scars there, sure. But normally I don't even see those. I just see the beautiful person she is."

Gari doesn't mourn the identity she lost on that snowy road.

"I'm glad to have the face I have," she says quietly.

Feb. 27 will be the 13th anniversary of the accident. Usually her family and friends don't even remember the exact day.

But Gari always thinks about it.

"I may not even mention it to anybody, but I know inside," she says. "It's like a secret celebration. I note that here's another year of somebody who wasn't expected to live, somebody who wasn't expected to walk. And I think, I'm out here doing it."



FAMILY GET-TOGETHER: Gari Carter, 54, poses with her daughter, Caroline, 27, and her son, Sullivan, 24. As an 11-year-old, Sully helped to save his mother's life.