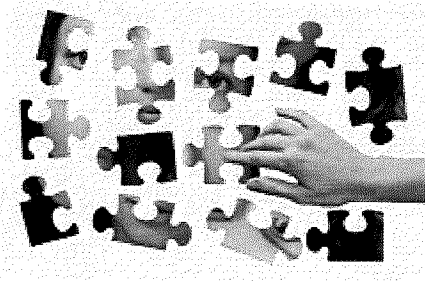


My Facial Feminization Surgery Experience *by* Karen S.



Facial Feminization Surgery (FFS) is an umbrella term for a number of different, but related, surgical procedures including scalp advancement, forehead contouring, brow lift, cheek implants, face lift, neck lift, nose job, upper lip shortening, chin feminization, jaw tapering, and/or a tracheal shave. FFS is considered cosmetic surgery so it is not covered by most medical insurance. Depending on the doctor and the specific procedures elected, the cost of FFS starts in the low thousands but can exceed \$50,000. My FFS cost almost \$40,000 -- I am blessed that I had acquired enough assets to cover the cost. A recent study found that fewer than 1 in 5 trans women undergo FFS because of the cost. In this article I will discuss my surgery, how I chose my doctor and how FFS changed my life.

While some FFS procedures can be performed by a competent cosmetic surgeon, many trans women go to one of the handful of doctors that are known for their work with MTF patients. We are lucky to have two FFS specialists right in our backyard: Dr. Ousterhout in San Francisco and Dr. Beck in San Mateo. These two doctors have very different philosophies which are reflected in very different cost structures.

Dr. Douglas Ousterhout is considered by many to be the father of FFS and is probably the best known FFS surgeon in the world. His book *Facial Feminization Surgery: A Guide for the Transgendered Woman* is a must-read for anyone seriously considering surgery. Dr. O (as he is known) focuses on facial skeletal reconstruction. His goal is to rework the facial bone structure such that the post surgical skull dimensions will be similar to those of the "average" female skull. This means different amounts of bone work for each person depending on what your face looks like before surgery. Because of his approach, many people say "all Ousterhout girls look the same." Having seen pictures of many of his patients I can say this is not true, but I understand that some people might think this because of his approach. Bone alone, however, does not make a face; "soft tissues" (tendons, fat, cartilage, etc.) are very important in determining how we look.

My surgery was performed by Dr. Joel Beck. I first heard of Dr. Beck through an article in the May 2010 issue of Facets (FFS: What Is It and How Does it Affect Us?) and I learned that Dr. Beck has completed FFS on a number of River City Gems. Dr. Beck primarily focuses on soft tissue, not bone. His goal is to feminize the face you have, not alter your face to fit a genetic female template. As he says "people are often attractive because they DON'T conform to statistical norms." Sacramento trans women I spoke with who have gone to Dr. Beck gave him good reviews. As one told me, Dr. Beck is an artist.

I chose to work with Dr. Beck, but before I made my decision I did my research: I met with both doctors, talked with people I knew, read posts on the Yahoo FFS Support group, read blogs by trans women who had gone

through FFS, and visited cosmetic surgery web sites. By the time of my surgery in early November 2010, I felt relaxed, ready and prepared.

Why did I choose Dr. Beck over Dr. O? It came down to two questions: 1) Did I need Dr. O's extensive bone work to feminize my appearance or would Dr. Beck's soft tissue work give me the look I wanted? 2) How much money was I willing to part with? Dr. O would have cost me over \$10,000 more than Dr. Beck. Ultimately, I didn't feel that I needed the chin and jaw work that Dr. O recommended and I felt that Dr. Beck would be able to feminize my forehead without Dr. O's proposed invasive bone work. In the end, the decision was easy and I'm very happy I went with Dr. Beck.

On Monday November 1, while the Giants were winning the World Series, Dr. Beck completed my scalp advancement, forehead contouring, brow lift, cheek implants, face lift and neck lift. After a day off to rest, I was back in surgery on Wednesday, November 3 where Dr. Beck completed my nose job and upper lip shortening. My total time in surgery was 12 hours, but I was back in my own home recuperating the night of November 3.

From my research I knew that most FFS patients said they had very little pain. While that seemed pretty hard to believe, I found out it was true. Once I was out of my anesthesia-induced haze, my face and neck were black and blue, my face was very swollen and I was pretty tired, but there was very little pain other than scattered headaches. I went back to see Dr. Beck on Monday, November 8 to have my stitches removed and again on November 15 to have my staples removed. The evening before my staples came out was the only time I can say that I was really in pain -- those little buggers had started to hurt!

I knew that the initial swelling would take about a month to go down and that it would take a year for my new features to settle in, but my big question was "when will I be able to go out?" My goal was to make it to the Gems social on Saturday, November 13 but I was doing so well that I ended up ahead of schedule and went out to dinner with friends on Friday, November 12! How did I feel? WOW! GREAT! Even though I still had swelling, when I looked in the mirror I saw the first signs of a girl looking back! I attended the November Gems social and, I've got to say, I loved the attention! Today, three months after surgery, my features continue to improve and I love how I look.

As I wrote earlier, I completed research before my surgery and felt ready for what was to come, but I found I wasn't at all prepared for the emotional changes. My FFS did more than change my appearance -- it changed my transition.

Before FFS I could show someone my driver's license and joke "I think I look much prettier than in my picture." After surgery this was no longer funny because when I showed someone my ID I was outing myself. Before FFS I thought I'd be okay presenting as a guy part time while looking for a job. After surgery I realized that I couldn't go backwards, not even part time. Before FFS I wasn't taking my voice training seriously. After surgery my voice was all I thought about. The reason for the attitude change was simple: before FFS I thought going full time was "somewhere" in the future. After surgery, I realized that living full time was staring me in the face and it scared me -- I felt like my transition was getting away from me! But I knew I needed to move forward and so I did. I went full time just a few weeks after my surgery and filed for a legal name change.

WOW! If someone had told me on November 1 that I would be full time within three weeks I'd have said they were crazy. I didn't know then how powerfully FFS would impact me, but here is a simple way to see what it did. Before FFS I never got "ma'amed" unless I was presenting female. After surgery I get ma'amed every day, even when I'm letting my facial hair grow out for electrolysis! My goal was to be accepted as female and I can

tell you it feels good!

My FFS changed me and accelerated my transition in wonderful and scary ways, but the ride has been great. I know there is debate in the trans community about FFS -- some view it as simply an appeal to vanity. Respectfully, I disagree. I'll echo the words of trans-activist Donna Rose who said of her FFS, "it was the single most important event of my entire transition, including the 'other' surgery." Personally, I knew shortly after I began my transition that I was going to want FFS because it was very important to me that I be taken seriously as a woman, both socially and in the workplace. I don't need others to validate who I am, but how others perceive us has a very powerful impact on how we are treated. I am very proud to be trans, but the point of my transition was to live as a woman, not as a trans woman. I want to be able to choose when and where I come out to someone, and my FFS has played a significant role in helping me reach that goal.

Today, I am three months post-surgery and three months full time. I still have a long transition road ahead of me, but I am happy with all of the choices I have made. When I look in the mirror I finally see the woman I always knew was there, and that feels really great. For the first time in my life, I am happy with who I am.

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