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In Surgeon's Laser, Teen Finds Healing

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Cosmetic surgery helped erase the scars on Ross Anson's neck and face. After a dark year of doubt, he says he finally feels like himself again.

July 09, 2006 | Bob Pool | Times Staff Writer

The facial scars were disappearing. And so were the scars on Ross Anson's psyche.

"I'm back to normal!" the 19-year-old exclaimed as he returned to thank the Beverly Hills plastic surgeon who is restoring his appearance after a near-fatal neck slashing.

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Anson was attacked at a Fourth of July party last year near his Bakersfield home by another 19-year-old, who sliced him seven times with a razor-like box cutter.

Emergency-room doctors were able to keep him from bleeding to death. But the slashing left hideous scars on Anson's neck and head. Embarrassed by his looks, he grew his hair long to hide the red cut marks and slowly began to withdraw from society.

"He'd always been very motivated and energetic, and now he had given up. He was just not getting out of the house," said Debbie Anson, his mother.

He left his job in jewelry sales because customers were wary of his appearance. "One day I said, 'Hey, you know, it's probably about time you went back into the workforce,'" Debbie Anson said. "I'd never had to prod him like that. That's when he said, 'Mom, everybody looks at me funny.' That's when I realized he needed some help."

A relative newcomer to Bakersfield, Anson turned to the Internet to look for an experienced cosmetic surgeon. It wasn't until her son met with Dr. Brent Moelleken that she learned not only could he remove the scars -- but he was willing to do it for free.

Over the last 11 years, Moelleken has performed about 20 facial restorations without charge, primarily for maimed children and abused women.

He's now setting up a nonprofit corporation called About Face to cover the cost of expanding the free

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plastic-surgery service.

State funding is sometimes available to help pay for such procedures for crime victims. But the funding is rarely enough to cover the entire cost of surgery to cut away scar tissue and laser treatment, Moelleken said. Anson's treatment cost about \$7,000.

The doctor said he decided to help Anson when he learned that the youth's "very gang-like" look and "gothic-like long hair" were destroying his self-esteem and threatening his future livelihood.

"He almost died from an extremely horrible thing. Not only does he have problems with his jewelry job, he's got these scars that remind him of how someone cut his throat and almost killed him," Moelleken said prior to the surgery.

The initial surgery and laser treatment March 20 was successful. So much so, in fact, that Anson was forced to postpone his first follow-up treatment with Moelleken on April 20 because he had landed a job interview that day. He delayed it a second time June 16 because he was working at his new job.

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"It's going great. I'm working at Costco and it's all good," he proudly told Moelleken during the rescheduled doctor's office visit late last month.

The Fourth of July attack happened outside a flier-advertised party when Anson was confronted by a youth he had clashed with at a previous open party.

"He socked a girl I know in the mouth, and I got down on him for that and hit him over the head with a bottle," Anson said. "He told me he was going to kill me."

The attacker, Dominic Quintana, pleaded no contest April 19 to a charge of attempted murder and was sentenced in June to 11 years in Wasco State Prison.

At the visit last month, Moelleken administered several steroid shots to reduce residual scarring on Anson's right jaw and talked of setting a date for additional laser work.

"It's healing very well. It's flat, and you'll have a much harder time seeing the scar. This is going to look great," he said.

Anson explained his reluctance as a freshly hired employee to ask for time off from his new job. Moelleken promised to work his schedule around his young patient's.

"You're outgoing now. You've got a job. You got a haircut. You're like a new guy," the surgeon said.

Anson agreed.

"You know how you're driving down the highway and see all the different exits? Some of them can derail you if you take the wrong one," he said.

That's why, he confided, "I don't go to open parties anymore."

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