



After his artificial cornea replacement surgery, William can now see his family members, including, from left, Alex, Brandy, Haley and David.

— photo courtesy of James and Kristen Pevahouse

Gift of sight

After artificial cornea replacement surgery, man has vision back

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Staff writer

After a paper mill “steam and acid” accident left local man William Culver burned and legally blind in 1989, his life plunged into darkness.

With his wife Becky’s help, he has faced many adversities over the past 24 years.

Today, after artificial cornea replacement surgery, William can see 20/25 in his right eye, and is excitedly seeing again. He especially enjoys seeing family members, including all his grandchildren and great-grandchildren for the first time.

“I’d like to say the reason I’m even here is because I’m a Christian. I wasn’t supposed to live from the severity of the burns,” said William, of Counce.

“Our heavenly father has carried us through,” said Becky.

At age 42, after working 16 years at the paper mill in Counce, William, a midnight shift millwright at the time, came into contact with a large amount of acidic steam. With 90 percent of his body burned and 40 percent of that as third degree burns, William was rushed to The Med Burn Center in Memphis.

“Infection rate is huge,” said Becky. “And burn patients need more calories than usual. Sadly sometimes burn patients starve to death because they can’t get enough calories eaten.”

“They said my eyes looked like fried eggs,”

said William. “By 10 days after the accident, I had lost 36 pounds.”

Becky, William’s high school sweetheart, was by his side through everything.

William’s eyes were sewn shut with a small area left open for daily steroid drops during the first year.

“They were protecting the eyes and allowing them to heal all they could on their own,” said Becky.

Medical efforts were put in place to help William’s skin heal and eventually he was out of danger as his skin slowly improved.

“You have to learn to deal with how you look afterward. It’ll change your life,” said William, who was left with scars across the front of his legs, body, arms and face.

William was dependent on Becky “to be his eyes” until he got his first donor cornea replacement in his right eye. A donor cornea is only available after a person dies.

“I could see a little bit after the surgery. It was my goal to act as normal as possible and many people in the community did not realize how little I could see,” said William. “My right eye was worse and the doctor did all he could to save the sight in it.”

The donor cornea died after a year. This was to be a pattern over the next 24 years, with William receiving six donor corneas, each one lasting a short while. Even with the donor corneas, William would sit two feet from the large



William and Becky Culver are excited about William’s artificial cornea surgery which restored 20/25 sight to his right eye after 24 years of being legally blind.

— photo courtesy of James and Kristen Pevahouse

television to see anything.

“I started having grandchildren right after the accident,” said William.

“He would rock the grandbabies and hold them for an hour and a half while they slept,” said Becky. “If you put them down, they’d only sleep a short while.”

Artificial cornea replacement is a relatively new procedure and Dr. Ming Wang in Nashville performed the surgery on William’s right eye in March 2012.

Before the surgery, William’s vision had reduced to “seeing only the difference between light and dark.”

“As soon as the bandage was removed after surgery, he sat there blinking,” said Becky. “William could see 20/50 out of his eye right then! It continued to improve over the next few weeks.”

There was so much for William to experience with his new sight.

The couple has eight grandchildren and two great-grandchildren he had never seen clearly, and of course, seeing Becky and his grown children Cory, Clark and Wenea, after so much time was amazing.

“Whenever you go through a trauma, you adapt. Whatever it takes, that’s what you do,” said Becky, who has driven William to countless doctor’s visits in Memphis and Nashville even though she used to have anxiety attacks just thinking about driving in large cities.

She also advises, “Don’t give up and don’t wallow in your misery.”

“Learn to laugh,” said William.

William’s doctor has plans for a donor cornea surgery for his left eye later this year.

“I have hopes to get my driver’s license back after all these years,” said William. “This eye procedure is so new, I don’t have any longterm guarantees, so we’re planning some trips this year to Mexico and Canada.”



William and Becky were married in 1966, at ages 18 and 17. They have found the recipe for success over the past 46 years by “not giving up” and “not wallowing in misery.”

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