



James O'Neal: 'It's perfect'

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The last time we saw James O'Neal was in the operating room. He waited nearly 30 years for that life-changing day. It was [the day he hoped to become a new man.](#)

O'Neal's face was severely distorted. The left side was completely hidden by a massive tumor that stretched his face like an old sweater.

The only remedy was radical and risky surgery. That day came on November 6.

Complications came quickly.

"He's losing too much blood," plastic surgeon Dr. Peter Neligan said to his team of surgeons just 2 hours into the nearly 8-hour operation.

The surgeons at the University of Washington Medical Center stopped operating twice. O'Neal lost blood faster than doctors could replace it. The tumor's blood vessels, which are prone to bleeding, gushed.

"We're on top of things," Neligan reassured his team.

O'Neal would later learn he set a record for blood loss at the UW. He needed 28 units of blood. His body only holds about eight.

"That was tough," said Neligan, who was relieved and pleased. "Good work everybody, thank you."

After the surgery, O'Neal had to get through five days in the Intensive Care Unit. The swelling from the surgery was so extreme he had to rely on a breathing tube for fear his throat would swell shut. But whatever the risk, O'Neal welcomed it.

"I'm not nervous at all," he said before surgery.

I asked James to keep a video diary prior to surgery.

"I've been doing a lot of thinking, ready to get this done, become a new man. Hopefully (I) find a lot of things change in my life," he said in the diary.

The first change came when he woke from surgery and felt his face.

"The first thing I did was look up and say, 'wow, I have a nose!' " O'Neal said.

Then it hit him -- the tumor was really gone.

"It was like, ' wow, it's gone!' " said O'Neal as he felt his face, "It feels good not to have that on my face no more."

The heavy tumor is gone. His nose - once twisted sideways - now rests where it should. His lips are still swollen, but the extra folds of skin have been thinned, and his ear, which dangled near his shoulder, is back where it belongs. For the first time he can see his entire chin.

O'Neal was born without a left eye, but he doesn't mind. He loves his eye patch.

"It's been kind of interesting, like I'm looking in the mirror saying, 'Is that really me in there? That looks good,'" said O'Neal.

I accompanied O'Neal to the hospital when the time came to get his stitches out.

"That looks great," said Neligan as he removed more than 100 stitches from O'Neal's face. There are even more stitches inside his face that will eventually dissolve.

When all the stitches were out, O'Neal reached for the mirror. "Looks good! I like it. It's perfect, perfect. Oh, yeah!" he said.

When O'Neal's sisters first saw him, they nearly swooned.

"Oh, look at you, look at that beautiful chin," said Billie. "Go ahead and pose like we showed you."

O'Neal then took on a thinking-man pose straight into the camera, complete with a movie-star smirk. The new-found confidence was overwhelming, even for a stoic O'Neal.

"We love you," said his sisters as they leaned over his hospital bed and kissed his head.

"I know," said a choked-up O'Neal, "I love you, too."

They all remember what their late mother taught them.

"She always said everybody is born with a handicap, no matter what," said O'Neal, "She said some handicaps you can't see, but we all have one."

O'Neal's mother also had tumors.

"I'm sure she was watching down, thinking, 'that's my boy. He's getting something he wants and deserves.' I'm sure she's very happy," said O'Neal.

O'Neal's mother has got to be proud. Her son not only got a life-changing surgery but also managed to inspire a community.

"I really love James. He is really a heartfelt kind of guy," said Katie Knopf, O'Neal's friend and customer at the Safeway grocery store where he works.

A few months after Knopf decided to launch [a fundraising campaign for O'Neal's surgery](#), she contacted the Problem Solvers for help. The donations poured in.

KOMO News [shared O'Neal's story](#) over the last six months and it has been seen around the world. Inspired viewers and readers [sent in their donations](#). It was the only way he could afford the surgery, O'Neal said.

"That really touched me, it showed me that people care about me, and they think I'm a nice guy. I really appreciate everything everybody did, it really touched me," he said.

But O'Neal touched us all. He's our Charlie Brown. No matter what, he always has hope.

"I never let anything stop me, ever," he said.

Just like Charlie Brown's determination to kick that football, even though he knows Lucy may snatch it away, O'Neal always goes for it.

"People are going to stare, regardless. Live your life to the fullest everyday regardless, and you'll be happy," he said.

O'Neal never hides. He's always done exactly what he wants and never let what he called his handicap stop him. That courage inspired a community.

Two weeks after his surgery, O'Neal went back to his job site at Safeway to show off his new look. The moment he walked in the door, co-workers and customers responded. Congratulations and compliments poured in.

O'Neal's courage has inspired us all and taught us what it means to embrace our essential selves.

"I'll be different on the outside, but not on the inside," said O'Neal.

James suffers from a genetic disease he was born with called [Neurofibromatosis](#).

He will have the tumor bulk removed from his neck in six months. The tumors will slowly grow back, but doctors say minor procedures every three to five years will keep them at bay.

Knopf collected more than \$125,000, the Problem Solvers took in nearly \$40,000 and Safeway raised \$75,000 for a total of \$240,000. Thank you, everyone!

More information:

[Dr. Peter Neligan](#)

[University of Washington Medical Center](#)

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