

Mayo Clinic News Network

Title: Mayo's first face transplant patient meets donor's family / Date: November 10, 2017

Intro: "Thank you so much." It is a heartfelt message Andy Sandness has been eager to deliver personally ever since becoming Mayo Clinic's first face transplant recipient in 2016. His opportunity finally arrived recently, when he met the widow of his donor, Lilly Ross. She was every bit as eager to see and hear for herself the difference her late husband's gift was able to make in Sandness' life. Dennis Douda was there for the Mayo Clinic News Network.

Video

Audio

Total running time [4:20]	/// VIDEO
Lilly Ross speaking	"I told Becca I am terrified, but I am excited. I'm not ready for this."
Dennis Douda speaking	Lilly Ross is not the only one feeling a case of anxious jitters this morning.
Andy Sandness speaking	"When you first do something like this, it's just a big excitement to finally meet each other just to – I mean, the buildup is just so much, and then there's anxiety and pressure."
Dennis Douda speaking	One-and-a-half years after the surgery that transformed his life, Andy Sandness is about to meet one of the key people who made it possible.
Andy Sandness speaking	"Well, I've always said that it isn't a decision that I would want to make. It's a very tough decision."
Dennis Douda speaking	Calen Rudy Ross was Lilly's husband. She was 19-years-old and eight months pregnant when the high school sweetheart she called "Rude" took his own life. Lilly's decision to donate more than just her husband's vital organ's enabled Andy to become Mayo Clinic's first face transplant patient.
TITLE: Brooks Edwards, M.D. Transplant Center Mayo Clinic	"At the time of the transplant, we had nine surgeons operating. We used over 40 operating room staff: scrub nurses, perfusionists and so on."
Dennis Douda speaking	The operation took nearly 60 hours to complete, and involved virtually every tissue below Andy's eyes.
Dr. Samir Sardini speaking	"They would have cutting guides for us that we would clip on the bones. They would give us the exact location of the cut, exact angle of the cut, so when we took the donor's face and put it on the recipient, it would fit perfectly."

Dennis Douda speaking	As for just how perfectly, Lilly has waited a long time to see for herself.
Lilly Ross and Andy Sandness speaking	"You look really good. Thank you so much."
Lilly Ross speaking	"He looks a little like him. Andy looks a little bit like Rude, like with the – Andy can't grow hair right here, and neither could Rude. And, ah, he's got the flushed cheeks, and he's got a little mole on his nose. Otherwise, I see Andy. I don't see much of Rude in him."
Dennis Douda speaking	Andy, on the other hand, sees Rude in the young couple's son Leonard.
Andy Sandness speaking	"He's adorable. Are you kidding me?"
Dennis Douda speaking	Lilly says the lasting legacy her husband left their son is the unselfish act of choosing to be an organ donor.
Lilly Ross speaking	"I am extremely proud of Rude – that he was able to help numerous people with the heart, the liver, the lungs, the kidneys, the pancreas. This is where we actually get to see the difference in how much he actually helped somebody."
Andy Sandness speaking	"I don't know that you can ever say enough thanks for what they've given me. I mean, Lilly, it's an unbelievable... it's an unbelievable gift. There just, I mean, you can't... you can't give enough thanks. You can't give enough money. There's nothing you can do. Except now I can just show them."
Dennis Douda speaking	Ten years after Andy's own ill-fated attempt to end his life, he is savoring the little things again that most of us take for granted.
Andy Sandness speaking	"So, now, I'm able to eat, eat food finally. My speech is better – still needs work, but that'll come."
Dennis Douda speaking	Since Andy's transplant, he has gotten a promotion, started dating and fulfilled a request to express his deep appreciation to Lilly in person.
Andy Sandness speaking	"It's just a relief to finally meet her, and I think the more we're able to talk, the more our friendship will become stronger."
Dennis Douda speaking	Upon meeting Andy, Lilly had one additional request, too: to touch the face that has helped bring healing to more than one family.

Andy Sandness speaking	"It tickles."
Lilly Ross Speaking	"OK, ready?"
Andy Sandness speaking	"I'm gonna close my eyes."
Lilly Ross Speaking	"It feels really good. It does."
Lilly Ross speaking	"You're helping somebody else. I'm gonna cry. It makes me extremely happy to know he's going to be able to do what he wants in life now."
CLOSING SLIDE	Copyright Mayo Clinic

Anchor tag: Sandness has started a trust fund in honor of his donor to benefit Rudy and Lilly Ross' son, Leonard. He and Lilly also hope to help raise awareness about two causes that are important to them: organ donation and suicide prevention.