

He lost his wife. She lost her vision.
They found each other and fell in love.

JOY AFTER DARKNESS



Both Chris and Misty Montgomery had survived heartbreak separately before they met. On their second date, Chris shared that his wife, who died suddenly from a brain aneurysm in December 2006, had been an organ donor. And Misty, who received a cornea transplant to regain her vision, saw a caring generosity that someone who hadn't gone through a transplant wouldn't have seen. SAM UPSHAW JR./COURIER JOURNAL

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Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Misty Montgomery remembers locking eyes with Chris on their first date.

They were both too nervous to eat, and instead, picked at their food and just gazed at each other.

Rationally she knew it was much too soon to tell, but in those first moments, she felt like she was staring at her husband and her future.

She never could have seen that just four years before.

Misty wasn't born with the corneas that helped her see Chris' warm, kind dark eyes. In 2005, she was diagnosed with a rare waterborne parasite in her eye called acanthamoeba that slowly and painfully took away her sight. She went from being an independent college student, who supported herself, to hiding from the smallest flickers of light in her parents' home. Her fa-



The Montgomery family at Walt Disney World.

MONTGOMERY FAMILY PHOTOS

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ther put fleece blankets under the blinds to block out the sun, and she wore the darkest sunglasses.

Something as small as a light on a DVD player brought her excruciating pain.

Misty couldn't build a career or even go on a date while she was homebound suffering from this rare disease. If she ever gave birth, she could hold her baby in her arms, but she'd never see her child smile.

In those moments, it felt like her life was over. Having a butterfly-filled dinner like the one she was having with Chris four years later was out of reach.

When Chris thinks back on that first night in 2010, he tells almost the same story as Misty does. He barely ate whatever the server at Carrabba's Italian Grill brought him, and he remembers taking her to see the movie Inception, but the plot was completely lost on him.

He was just thrilled to be sitting next to her.

Mutual friends encouraged him to ask her out, but Chris didn't think he was much of a catch.

He was 14 years older than her and had three young children. Chris hadn't been on a date since his wife Tracy died suddenly from a brain aneurysm in December 2006. He was lonely and fatherhood was difficult as he tried to manage things like potty-training his youngest on his own. His personal life took a backseat as he tried to be a mom and a dad for Lily, 1, Maddie, 3, and Ryan, 5.

"I needed to make sure that I took care of them, and that their needs were met instead of mine," he said.

'It's a strange feeling. You do feel this guilt'

Both Misty and Chris had survived heartbreak separately before they settled into that table together in 2010.

Misty lived through eight months of grueling tests, isolation and agonizing treatments before the doctors finally removed the parasite. The whole ordeal left her with a white, film-like scar over the front of her eye, and her vision was gone.

When her doctor suggested a cornea transplant, she didn't feel worthy of one. Misty had signed her organ donor card when she was 16 years old, but she'd told her mother at the time that her eyes were the one thing she didn't want to give away.

Now, she was asking for someone else's cornea tissue.

As the day of her surgery grew closer, she couldn't shake the feeling the person who was helping her was about to die. Cornea recipients are usually matched with donors that are about their age, and Misty was young. That weighed on her, too. No matter who gave her that tissue, it would come from someone whose life was cut short far too soon.

"It's a strange feeling," she explained.



Silhouettes of the Montgomery family hang in the home. By the third date, he asked her when she wanted to get married. SAM UPSHAW JR./COURIER JOURNAL

What to know about organ donations and cornea transplants

- On average 22 people die waiting for a life-saving organ donation.
- There are 114,000 people on the list waiting for a lifesaving transplant.
- Every 10 minutes someone is added to the national waiting list for a transplant.
- More than 1,000 people in Kentucky are waiting on a lifesaving transplant.
- One organ donor can save up to eight lives.
- One tissue donor can head up to 50 lives.
- Every year 1,000 Kentuckians have eyesight restored through a tissue transplant.
- Cornea transplant is the most common of all transplants performed, and more than 46,000 happen in the United States per year.
- Cornea transplants have a success rate that's higher than 95 %.

Source: Eye Bank of Kentucky and Donate Life

"It's something that I don't think a lot of recipients, probably, talk about. But you do feel this guilt. Like, what's happening somewhere else?"

Four years later in that restaurant, Misty got a glimpse at just what that "somewhere else" could look like, and it was Chris, Ryan, Maddie and Lily.

Chris' wife collapsed at work, and never woke up. The doctors did everything they could, but he had to make the tough decision to take her off life support. Even amid the heartbreak and grief, he thought about what Tracy's

death could bring to someone else.

His wife's organs saved seven lives and her cornea restored sight to two others.

Chris never could have imagined that four years later, when his grief had finally calmed enough to ask someone on a date, that the woman staring lovingly back at him would have such a heartfelt appreciation for that decision.

'Oh my gosh, I can see'

Misty's own cornea transplant surgery was rescheduled three times because there wasn't young tissue available. Eventually, she received a donation from the Rocky Mountain Lions Eye Bank in Colorado.

Her donor was just 30 years old. The day after Misty's surgery, doctors took the patch off her eye, and while she couldn't make out details yet, she was able to read the largest "E" on the eye chart in front of her.

"Oh my gosh, I can see," she cried. But amid the excitement and the hope, Misty couldn't stop thinking about the donor and their family. She was getting a second chance at a full and happy life while someone else somewhere must have been hurting.

"There aren't many days that go by that I don't think of them," she said. "I always wonder, who they were, what they had seen with this eye."

Over the next year, doctors slowly removed the stitches from her eye and as her new cornea took hold, the world around her became even more clear. Misty could hold her head up without any pain and her appetite returned.

She started noticing the details on blades of grass, individual leaves on trees, and the ways that sunset glowed. Her niece had been a newborn when the acanthamoeba attacked her eye, and now she could see the bright toddler the little girl had grown into. She went back

to work, first at an eBay store helping people sell things and then later at the Eye Bank of Kentucky.

When a friend asked her to help coach a cheerleading program at a nearby church, she met 5-year-old Lily Montgomery and her father. She had heard the family's story before, and she even remembered praying for them at the request of a friend.

She often sat behind Chris and the children at church, and she always made a point to say hello to them. Eventually, they both volunteered to teach vacation bible school, and Lily was in her class.

All these years later, she still says Lily was the first Montgomery she ever loved.

When Chris finally got the courage to ask her on a date, they both felt a natural click, and over the next few weeks, everything changed for both of them.

On their second date, Chris shared that his wife had been an organ donor and Misty saw a caring generosity that, maybe, someone who hadn't gone through a transplant wouldn't have seen.

By the third date, he was asking her what time of year she wanted to get married.

The spring sounded nice, she said. She wanted everything to look green.

'The kind of man I want'

They were married on May 28, 2011, and she saw the church doors open and Chris beaming and crying at the end of the aisle waiting for her. Ryan was his best man, and Lily and Maddie were flower girls. Their son, Sam, was born the following year, and eventually, Misty adopted the other children, too. That's what Chris loves most about Misty — her endless ability to give and her loving heart.

"She married me, but really she married all of us," Chris said.

And while there are plenty of things that Misty adores about Chris, what sticks out to her more than anything is his selflessness.

He put his own life on hold to focus on his children when Tracy died, and amid all of that, he found the strength to help someone just like her.

"This man, at the worst time of his life, when his wife suddenly died, when he's left with these three babies, he said 'yes,'" to organ donation, Misty said.

"This is the kind of man I want. Somebody who is so selfless that in their darkest hour, they think of what good can come out of it. And that's what he did."

Features columnist Maggie Menderski writes about what makes Louisville, Southern Indiana and Kentucky unique, wonderful, and occasionally, a little weird. If you've got something in your family, your town or even your closet that fits that description — she wants to hear from you. Say hello at mmenderski@courier-journal.com or 502-582-4053.

Join the Kentucky Organ Donor Registry or update your registration here: www.registtermeky.org.