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Ex-CIA disguise master helps disfigured people



Photo : AFP

ASHBURN, United States (AFP) - He once created new faces for undercover CIA spies, but today Bob Barron has turned his talents to those really in need: making prosthetic ears, noses, fingers and nipples for people disfigured congenitally or by accidents or cancer.

For over two decades, Barron was a master of disguise who made the fake noses, chins, skin and ears needed to protect the identities of Central Intelligence Agency operatives in the Cold War.

He even created whole faces to make "doubles" -- people who pose as someone else.

That experience could have garnered Barron a million-dollar Hollywood career in movie makeup when he retired in 1993. But he chose a bigger challenge.

"I thought if I could put someone in hiding, which I did in the agency, then a prosthetic device will bring people out of hiding," Barron said.

"If I can change people's identity, I can also give a person his identity back."

Since he created his business, Custom Prosthetic Designs (www.prosthesis.com) 12 years ago, he has made hundreds of false noses, ears and eyes together with the orbits.

His creations abound in his laboratory in Ashburn, Virginia, not far from CIA headquarters where he once worked in secret. Numerous casts and prosthetic pieces sit around, and he has two hefty photo albums filled with pictures of his work.

His spy years gave him the basis for his new career. "When I worked for the CIA I put people in hiding, I changed people's identities and also I made doubles.

"Agents depended on the realism of their disguise to keep them alive, this was my responsibility," he said, refusing to give any specifics of missions behind the communist Iron Curtain.

He made complete face disguises like that used by Tom Cruise in "Mission Impossible" -- a better-than-real face mask that took up to four hours to make and a few seconds to tear off when it served its use.

"It's very realistic ... but this kind of disguise is for a short period of time," Barron said.

Barron turned his attention to needy people in his last years at the spy agency.

"I was researching materials in the commercial field to make, maybe, my products better. So I went undercover to the Association of Medical Sculpture in New York, where they were doing a lot of prosthetic devices.

"I saw there so many people disfigured (and) I knew then I wanted to help those people... I knew at that time this will be my second career."

Barron was working on a false ear for five year old Peter Dankelson, who suffers from a birth deformity, when AFP interviewed him.

The Dankelsons drove nine hours from Michigan for a fitting, rather than going through reconstructive surgery which, Barron said, is never as satisfactory.

Barron had baked the new ear in an oven and, taking it from the mold, he applied a special glue and placed it on the left side of the boy's head, all the while explaining to Peter's mother Dede how to remove the ear at night and replace it in the morning.

He then took a palette of colors and a small paintbrush to color the prosthetic ear until it fit perfectly with Peter's face. It was a mirror image of the boy's other ear.

The Barrons broke out into huge smiles at the sight of the new ear, Peter, impatient to go back to school, saying he was proud to "have two ears like Dad".

"Peter is very excited, his glasses will stay on," beamed Dede.

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