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## Mission Possible:

### *Former CIA Disguise Specialist Constructs Happy Faces*

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A small boy walked, half skipping, hand-in-hand with his mother, who looked at him fondly. The boy was smiling from ear to ear, as was she, as they walked to their car in the parking lot.

That boy, Elijah Taylor, 6, had just received a new pair of ears from former CIA disguise specialist Robert Barron at Custom Prosthetics Inc. in Ashburn. Elijah has bilateral microtia, a birth defect that left him almost deaf and without ears. With the use of bone-anchored hearing aids, or BAHAs, Elijah is able to hear through the vibrations from the devices implanted in his head. However, his neatly kept sandy-colored hair was not enough to hide the under-developed mass of tissue, bone and cartilage that should have formed the outer ears.

The family, whose relatives own Great Country Farms in Bluemont, flew from Oklahoma City to visit Barron who would create a pair of prosthetic ears for Elijah. The Taylors opted against ear reconstruction surgery, an alternate procedure for those who suffer from microtia. The surgical procedure requires several operations to take skin from

the patient's side and shape it into the outer ear. A separate surgery is required to reconstruct the inner ear, which may allow the patient to hear again. Although reconstructive surgery may seem appealing, doctors warn their patients ahead of time that the reconstructed ear won't look natural.

"Ear reconstruction surgery is always disappointing. It never lives up to people's expectations," Barron said. He picked up a photo album off a nearby table and thumbed through it, pointing out disturbing images of mutilated and disfigured flesh.

"How can you call that an ear?" he asked. He stared at a profile picture of a young man with a mass of discolored tissue attached to the side of his head. The ear appeared to be more like a growth than the final result of ear reconstructive surgery.

"Now you can see why I'm such a stickler about reconstructive surgery," he said. "There are surgeries going on right now that ruin people's lives."

According to Barron, thousands of people every year suffer from microtia although a cause for the birth defect has yet to be defined. Barron has helped hundreds of patients to feel whole again by artificially restoring body parts

*Continued On Page B7*



Leesburg Today/ Catherine McKinney

**Former CIA Senior Disguise Specialist Bob Barron tints a set of prosthetic ears for 6-year-old Elijah Taylor of Oklaboma City. Taylor suffers from bilateral microtia, a birth defect that left him with under-developed outer ear structures.**

for cancer patients, burn victims and those with amputations and birth defects.

Barron has been working with prosthetics for nearly 30 years, including some 24 years of altering identities as a senior disguise specialist with the Central Intelligence Agency. Before retiring in 1993, Barron was awarded the agency's medal for exceptional service. He was responsible for providing convincing prosthetic disguises for agents in the field. Barron compared his job to the popular action film *Mission Impossible*, starring Tom Cruise, whose character used prosthetic masks to hide his identity.

"I kept agents alive with the state-of-the-art equipment I designed. It took them four hours to put the mask on and off in the movie," Barron said. "I can do it in three seconds both ways. That's what makes the mission possible, not mission impossible. Hollywood learned it from me," he said laughing, noting that film representatives asked Barron to work behind the scenes for Hollywood productions, but he turned them down. Instead, Barron has dedicated his talent to humanitarian causes.

"I can't wait to wake up in the morning and come to work," he said. "It's so gratifying to turn these people's lives around."

On average, the process requires about three office visits. The procedure is painless and is conducted in a relaxed environment. After considerable efforts to cast the perfect mold of the afflicted area, the finished product is hand painted and tinted to visually blend with the surrounding anatomy, creating a personalized, realistic and functional prosthesis for the patient.

Elijah and his mother Shannon Taylor arrived at Custom Prosthetics Inc., promptly at 9:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning for the final meeting with Barron.

"He's so excited," Shannon said. "This morning he asked me, 'Mommy, do I get to wear my glasses on my big ears or my little ears?'"

"We're going to tint your ears today," Barron said to Elijah, as he led the way to the back room. He seated the boy in a black chair and went to the work space in the middle of the room. Lying on the desk were the silicone molds of Elijah's ears.

On prior visits to see Barron, Elijah was accompanied by his identical twin Ezekiel. Barron took a clay molding of the eldest twin's ears and created prosthetic ears for his younger brother to wear.

Barron picked up the prosthetics and began applying an adhesive to the backs of both with a Q-tip, while explaining to Shannon how to put them on in the morning. The adhesive lasts all day and is waterproof, Barron said. As Elijah grows into adulthood, he will have to make the trip from Oklahoma City to Loudoun County to be refitted for new prosthetics.

Barron attached the ears to Elijah's head and sat down opposite him with a fine paintbrush and a ceramic tile palette. The boy held perfectly still, eyes transfixed on the cartoons playing on the television in front of him, while Barron began to tint the silicone molds to match the natural shade of the child's skin.

"Elijah was not a candidate for inner ear reconstructive surgery," his mother said. The surgical procedure can, in some cases, clean up the inside of the ear to allow patients to hear without the use of a hearing aid.



Photo credit: Leesburg Today/ Catherine McKinney

***Elijah and his mother, Shannon, smile from "ear-to-ear" together when he sees his new prosthetic ears in the mirror held before him. "He looks so much like his brother," Shannon said.***

"Instead of having these intricate tunnel systems, for lack of a better word, he has a huge mass of bone," she said. Specialists who had seen Elijah did not want to operate on him. Inside the ear are many delicate nerves that send impulses to the brain. If one of the nerves were struck or severed, Elijah could suffer permanent paralysis in his face. Doctors did not feel that inner ear reconstructive surgery could safely guarantee his hearing or prevent any further risk to his current condition.

"Until technology advances past our time, Elijah will always have to wear the BAHAs," Shannon said.

Once the prosthetics had dried, Barron stepped to the side for Shannon's approval before removing them and placing them on the desk to dry.

"It looks great, Elijah!" his mother said, hugging him. "You look just like your brother." And indeed, there was little indication that this was not his identical twin brother sitting before them. The only clues were the flesh-toned BAHAs sitting behind Elijah's new ears.

He lovingly fingered his ears and attempted to put his glasses back on. His mother bent down to help him, trying to bend the frames to fit his prosthetics, but to no avail. The glasses had been adjusted to specifically fit Elijah's ears before his visit to Barron.

"We're going to have to take him to an optometrist now," his mother sighed, all the while beaming at him.

For more information on Bob Barron and Custom Prosthetics Inc., visit [www.prosthe-sis.com](http://www.prosthe-sis.com) or call 703-723-4668. ■