

Former CIA Employee Finds Second Career While Working Undercover

■ Megan Kuhn, Staff Writer

When Alicia Economos first heard about Robert Barron and Custom Prosthetic Designs Inc., she had reason to be skeptical. Her daughter, Jennifer, born with microtia, had very little in the way of an external ear on the right side. Her daughter had already tried a prosthetic device, but mom said it looked more like a Barbie doll's ear than the ear of a teenager. Jennifer Economos also underwent reconstructive surgeries to restore her hearing and give her an external ear.

After watching her child go through 18 surgeries, 14 days in the hospital, six doctors and four failed implants, and countless, sometimes cross country, trips to get there, Alicia Economos was skeptical, she said.

She did not want her daughter's hopes dashed again.

Then Alicia Economos caught a talk-show episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in which the talkshow host was interviewing the anaplastologist Barron. The elder Economos changed her mind after seeing the improvements, she said.

Jennifer Economos, too, was impressed by the realism of Barron's work, and though she had been disappointed by others' attempts to create an ear in the past, she decided to contact him.

Barron has been working with prosthetics for three decades, though not always in a commercial field. The Bluemont resident learned how to make silicon mimic the tone and texture of skin while working for the CIA. For 24 years, the agency paid Barron to disguise agents.

He also learned how to airbrush photographs, doctor documents and counterfeit identity cards.

"Case officers lives depended on the realism of disguises to keep them alive," Barron said.

Barron landed the CIA job when he tried to deceive the parking lot gods at the Pentagon. At the time, he was working there as the art director of *Direction*, a monthly Navy magazine. Barron wanted a parking space closer to the entrance, so he created a parking permit and pulled into a prime spot. If a co-worker had not ratted him out,

the former Marine would have gotten away with it.

Barron earned a court date and then a \$50 fine for his efforts.

The judge was so impressed with the fake permit, he put in a call to the CIA. The agency was looking for people with that kind of artistic ability and called Barron for an interview. He joined the agency's Technical Services Division, and the rest is classified.

The job was stressful, but Barron enjoyed it, except for not being able to tell his son where he worked until the boy was a teenager. For the longest time, his child thought he had a lowly government job, Barron said.

The elder Barron said he would never enjoy working a lowly job after working for the CIA.

"I knew my second career had to be just as challenging as my first career to keep my interest. How do you find a career that's as interesting as saving peoples lives?" he asked.

Barron discovered his second career while working undercover. In 1983, he was investigating new disguise techniques and how the commercial market was using prosthetic materials while attending an Association of Medical Sculptures symposium, an annual event for prosthetics designers.

He learned that burn victims, cancer patients and people with medical defects used prosthetics to cover their abnormal body parts.

He thought, "If I can put someone in hiding, why can't I, in my second career, bring someone out of hiding. If I can change someone's identity, why can't I give someone back their identity with prosthetics?"

When the senior CIA disguise specialist retired in 1993, the agency allowed him to leave undercover as long as he did not talk about operations. This did not leave him with much of a sales pitch.

"I didn't have a portfolio," he said. "I couldn't show any of my work. It was difficult for anyone to grasp the technology without seeing it."

All the Southern Illinois University graduate had was his artwork, which included a painting of the Grand Canyon that he made in high school. The painting was so realistic that when he entered it in a contest, Barron won a blue ribbon in the photography category.

After Barron knocked on many doors without success, Dr. Craig Dufresne, a reconstructive surgeon, looked at the former CIA man's artwork.

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Barron explained that his work with the CIA was confidential, and Dufresne said, "I could understand that, being in Washington.... He has a very honest face. I saw the quality of his artwork. Ultimately [I] saw his prostheses. [He is] one of the finest anaplastologists I've ever met."

Dufresne, a clinical professor of plastic surgery at Georgetown Medical Center, began referring patients to Barron.

"Because he's so renowned and trusted, he actually helped me get to where I am today," Barron said of Dufresne.

But even with Dufresne's seal of approval, Custom Prosthetic Designs did not take off for seven years. The then home-based business had maybe two patients a month.

"The patients kept me going and wanted me to do more," Barron said.

At the time, his now ex-wife was the breadwinner, so he said he was not stressed by his sporadic income, which came from word of mouth referrals.

"I got into this as a hobby," he said. About three years into self-employment, Barron moved Custom Prosthetic Designs out of his home and into a professional building that housed doctors' offices in Vienna.

"I felt I had to be communicating with the medical field rather than working out of my house," he said.

The Illinois native also said that not knowing his patients background, something he would have known while working for the CIA, made him uneasy.

Seven years later, his hobby turned into a full-time job, thanks in part to media coverage.

"He went from cloak and dagger to Hollywood star," Dufresne said of his onceshy colleague.

Today he sees hundreds of patients a month. They come from across the United States, as far away as South Africa and

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Above: Robert Barron has been working with prosthetics for three decades. He learned how to make silicon mimic the tone and texture of skin while working for the CIA.

Right: Robert Barron's most common assignment for Custom Prosthetic Designs Inc. is making ears. The former CIA employe has drawers full of ear molds. When making a prosthetic, Barron said his priority is to fulfill patients' expectations, so they can interact with the public without people staring or making comments.



Barron

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Australia. He meets with patients most of the week, but sets aside lab days, on which he devotes his time to making molds and sculpting body parts: fingers, eyes, ears and noses.

At one point, his workload was so heavy, he nearly burned out. This was after Barron had moved into Loudoun County and was running his business out of his home. He was working seven days a week, often until 3 a.m.

"I didn't know when to go to bed," Barron said. "There's more to life than just working because if you don't have time, you burn out. I was burning out. If you burn out, your work shows it. It gets sloppy."

He bought office space in Ashburn and established weekday business hours. However, he works on weekends to accommodate patients who are unable to visit him during the workweek. Typically he meets with a patient three times. For patients who come from far away, he works overnight, so they only have to show up twice.

Some insurance companies cover prosthetics, which Barron does not consider cosmetic. Prosthetics can be a medical necessity. For example, a prosthetic ear improves hearing about 20 percent and a prosthetic nose prevents infections, he said.

His fees range from \$2,000 to \$12,000 and there is no set price list because some jobs are more complex than others. When someone inquires about his services, he

asks the person to send a photograph of the defective area to determine if he can help.

A more complex assignment is creating two ears and a nose, as Barron did for Phoenix police officer Jason Schechterle. The man's face, head and hands had burned away when another vehicle rear-ended his Crown Victoria and the police car exploded. Barron sculpted Schechterle's prosthetic body parts by looking at photographs of the police officer taken before the accident.

His most frequent assignment is making one ear for someone, who, like Jennifer Economos, was born with a birth defect. Barron does this by sculpting a mirror image of the normal ear. This usually takes about a week because he does all his work by hand.

When the patient picks up the ear, he gives usage instructions: Wear it during the day. Take it off at night. There are limitations to the prosthetic, he tells patients, for example he does not recommend people wear them while swimming. Depending on the amount of wear and tear, children come in for a new prosthetic every two years and adults every three to five.

When Barron showed Jennifer Economos her prosthetic ear, the then 16-year-old was pleased with the results for the first time.

"[I was] so used to seeing myself without an ear, it was amazing," she said.

Jennifer Economos later had a party to celebrate the prosthetic ear that worked. Barron keeps the party invitation in one of his scrapbooks, along with countless before and after photographs and thank you cards. Alicia Economos is no longer skeptical. ●