

# Man of a thousand faces



The hand of young Wyatt Mowray, who was waiting for fitting of an ear prosthesis Wednesday explored sample prosthetics in Robert R. Barron's office.

By Chris Baker  
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**R**obert R. Barron's business card says he is an "anaplastologist." A more apt job title might be "miracle worker."

Mr. Barron produces remarkably realistic prosthetics for people who are deformed or have been disfigured by accidents, diseases and other misfortunes. The prosthetics are made from silicone, which can be tinted to look like flesh.

His patients include a child born with malformed ears, a woman who lost an eye to cancer and a man who literally blew his face off with a shotgun during a failed suicide attempt.

"There is no better feeling in the world than giving someone back their quality of life," says Mr. Barron, whose salt-and-pepper hair betrays his youthful face.

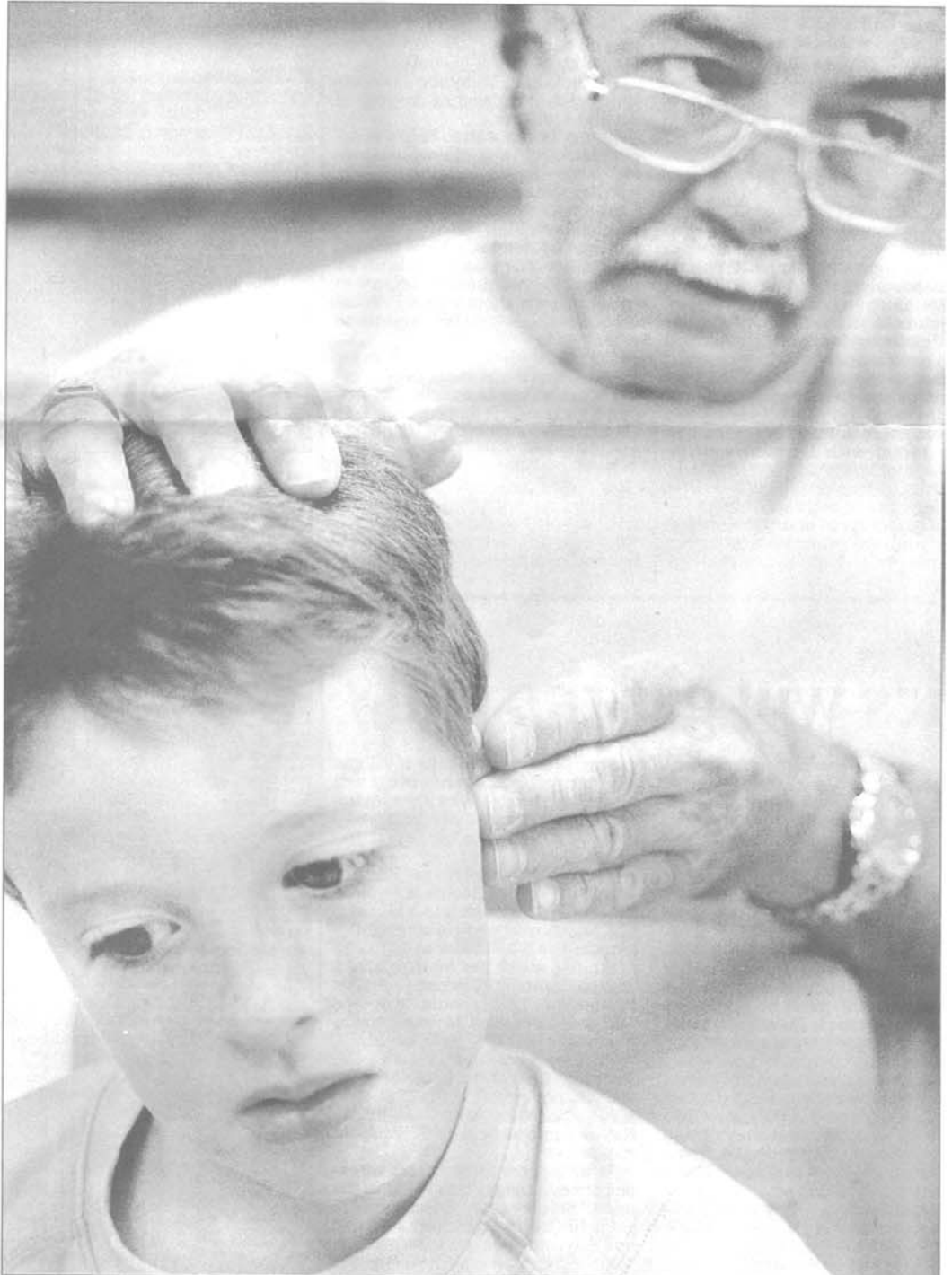
## Ex-CIA maker of disguises now recovers victims' quality of life

### Washington at Work

He learned his trade as a disguise maker for the CIA. He spent 24 years at "the agency," where he became a master at giving spies new identities, sometimes making elaborate masks to alter their appearance.

Mr. Barron started Custom Prosthetic Designs Inc. when he retired in 1993. He ran the business from the basement of his home until three weeks ago, when it moved into a roomy suite in an Ashburn, Va., office park.

It looks and feels like a medical practice, complete with a receptionist, a waiting area with magazines and a large examining room that feels sterile under the glow of fluorescent lights. Mr.



Mr. Barron, a former CIA disguise expert who now makes custom prosthetics for accident victims and people with deformities, affixed Wyatt's ear prosthesis yesterday in his Ashburn, Va. office.

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Photos by Liz O. Baylen/The Washington Times



Wyatt Mowray considered his new prosthetic ear in the mirror on Wednesday while his happy father looked on, and the hand of the prosthetic's maker, Robert R. Barron, gestured as he spoke to the Mowrays.

## WORK

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Barron refers to his clients as patients, but he quickly corrects them if they call him doctor.

"To me, you are a doctor," the mother of one of his young patients said recently.

"To me, you're a miracle worker," the woman's husband chimed in.

This day, as on most weekdays, Mr. Barron arrives at his office at about 7 a.m. and gets down to work.

Today most of his time will be spent making a set of fingers for an amputee who will arrive in two days to pick them up.

Shortly before 10 a.m., Mr. Barron's first patient arrives — Wyatt Mowray, a 7-year-old second-grader from Elko, Nev., who was born with a malformed ear, a condition known as microtia.

Some of Wyatt's classmates pick on him, calling him "the kid with one ear," according to his parents, Sean and Judy.

This is a big day for the little boy, when he will finally take home the prosthetic ear Mr. Barron has made for him.

Wyatt's journey to this moment began when he was 4 years old. His parents considered ear-reconstruction surgery, in which a surgeon removes a portion of a person's rib cartilage and uses it to create a new ear.

The surgery is painful and rarely produces anything that looks like a real ear.

Mr. Barron says the Mowrays are lucky. Often he sees patients after they have already had the surgery.

"The outcome of [the] surgery falls way short of almost everyone's expectation. They seem to always regret putting their child through the series of painful operations, let alone the lack of realism produced by the surgeries," Mr. Barron says.

Once the Mowrays decided against surgery for Wyatt, they looked for other options. When the family discovered Mr. Barron, they cancelled a trip to New York to see last year's Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade so they could fly to the Washington area.

During that visit, Mr. Barron used

clay to make molds of both of Wyatt's ears. Then he sculpted a mirror image of the boy's normal ear. That sculpture was used to make a silicon prosthetic that was baked, fitted to Wyatt's head and tinted to match his skin color.

The whole process usually takes four visits, but because the Mowrays came so far to see him, Mr. Barron combined some steps, requiring the family to visit him just three times.

Mr. Mowray remembers driving back to the hotel after Wyatt's first visit to Mr. Barron. His eyes moisten as he recalls his son's voice coming from the back seat. "Papa, I want to thank you for my new ear."

Today, on this final visit six months later, Mr. Mowray picks up his son and places him in Mr. Barron's examining chair, which looks like a dentist's chair. Wyatt sits on a booster seat.

Mr. Barron uses a cotton swab to coat the side of the prosthesis with an adhesive. "Now you remember how to do this, right?" he asks as the Mowrays peer over his shoulder.

Mr. Barron gently places the prosthesis over Wyatt's malformed ear. "You just want to press gently," he says.

Mr. Barron steps back, beaming as he examines his work.

"You want to see, pal?" he asks as he places a mirror in Wyatt's hands. This is the first time the boy has seen himself with two normal-looking ears.

A smile spreads across Wyatt's face. It is infectious.

Mr. Barron declines to disclose how much he charges for his prosthetics, saying it varies greatly from patient to patient. Some are simple, such as Wyatt's ear. Others are more complex, such as the mask he made for the man who attempted suicide.

The Mowrays say they really don't know what Wyatt's prosthetic ear cost because their insurance carrier covered it.

Mr. Barron figures he is one of only about 75 people in the nation who do this kind of work. He may very well be the most celebrated, with recent appearances on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," ABC News' "PrimeTime Thursday" and the Discovery Channel, and in the pages of

Reader's Digest and People magazine.

Mr. Barron photographs each patient at first meeting, and again after he has fitted the prosthetic(s). Almost every patient smiles in the "after" picture.

He keeps all the photos in an album that sits on the counter in his work room. Every picture tells a story.

There is the disfigured woman from Florida who was contemplating suicide when she ran across an article on Mr. Barron in Reader's Digest. "You saved my life," she told him later, after he made prosthetics for her.

There is the Arizona policeman who suffered extensive burns after a car accident. When the man's son saw him for the first time after the accident, he ran away screaming.

There is Louise Kurtz, one of the survivors of the September 11 attack on the Pentagon who suffered extensive burns.

Mr. Barron believes he is doing God's work. Over his life he's had several brushes with providence.

He was once in a serious car accident. A gas furnace blew up in his face in college, leaving him blind for three months. On another occasion he almost drowned.

"My purpose is to help people. The good Lord gave me a gift, and I know he's using me to help others."

His gifts lie not just in making prosthetics. He is also an energetic storyteller, regaling visitors with stories of his boyhood in the Midwest, his adventures as a Marine, his work as an art director at the Pentagon and, of course, his job at the CIA.

The Mowrays left Mr. Barron's office about 11 a.m. to take Wyatt to purchase his first pair of sunglasses. Mr. Barron asks them to let him know how Wyatt is faring.

Most of the rest of Mr. Barron's afternoon will be spent working on the fingers, as well as several other projects. He will grab dinner at a nearby grocery store, but won't leave the office until after 11 p.m.

"I'll continue to do this job as long as I can," Mr. Barron says. "I see no end to this, as long as I can see, as long as my hands are steady."