

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2003

Richmond Times-Dispatch
SECTION F

health, science, technology
EXPLORE

Prosthetic body parts can make everyday life easier.
A Northern Virginia man who once fashioned disguises for spies
now uses his skills as a medical craftsman.



A prosthetic eye made of medical-grade silicone sits atop hand-sculpted clay ear models in the office of Robert R. Barron.

DEAN H

Looking normal

BY TAMMIE SMITH

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They just want to look normal. To be able to go out in public without having to deal with rude stares and insensitive comments.

Pauline Milliner, a Virginia Beach great-grandmother, lost her left eye to sinus cancer. Jacqueline Decapua and Thomas Brown were born with ear deformities and are at an age when classmates can be cruel. Joyce Chandler Cox was severely burned in a freak vehicle accident in 1998 while working for the Richmond police department. Roland Sheppard has no nose. Another cancer casualty.

Surgical reconstruction, if even possible in their cases, would likely yield or has yielded only so-so results.

So they sought out Robert R. Barron, a man who turned his expertise in making disguises for spies into a medical arts career as an anaplastologist, or prosthesis maker. He uses medical-grade silicone to create prosthetic eyes, noses and ears that glue or snap on, hands and individual fingers that slide on like gloves, and quick-change whole-face masks that give burn victims freedom from gawking.

"It makes everyday life a lot easier," said Roland Sheppard, 62, of San Francisco, a retired union official who has worn a prosthetic nose since losing his own to cancer in 1995.

Without it, Sheppard said, "I would scare people. I would be walking around like the guy in [the movie]



"It's a good feeling," Robert R. Barron says of his work. "There is never a better feeling, to give back a person their life and make them feel whole again."

Minority Report: 'I have no nose.'

Barron works from an office in Ashburn, about 30 miles outside Washington, home to the nation's chief spy agency, the CIA, Barron's former employer.

While a CIA employee, Barron honed his skills in deception. In his work, he forged documents and made facial disguises for secret agents. He himself had six identities, six different passports and the prosthetic devices to go along with the disguises.

"I was in areas I never wanted to be in, some of the hell holes of the world," Barron said.

He can't really get any more specific than that.

What he can say is the disguises had to look real enough to get clandestine agents out of tight situations. The standard: At a foot away, about the distance you hold a book or newspaper to read, disguises had to be undetectable. A whole-face mask had to be able to go on or come off in three seconds.

They were exacting standards.

"I actually saved people's lives," Barron said. "They depended on the realism of their disguises to keep them alive."

When he retired from the CIA about 10 years ago, Barron considered his options. There was Hollywood, where being able to make people look better or worse than they really do is big business and would have been a lucrative move for him.

"I could have gone out to Hollywood. Several people called. . . . But it would not have been helping anybody.

"There was this other calling," he continued. "It's a good feeling. There is never a better feeling, to give back a person their life and make them feel whole again."

"I have had several patients who had been thinking about suicide and they found out about me in a magazine article."

He has been featured in *People* magazine and *Reader's Digest*. He was on an "Oprah" show on medical

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miracles this summer and has been on nighttime television newsmagazine shows. The combination of former spy and master disguise artist and hope for victims of medical catastrophes makes a fascinating tale.

His clients sing his praises.

Valerie Decapua's daughter Jacqueline, 9, was born with microtia, a deformity in which the outer ear is either absent or abnormally small.

"She was starting to feel self-conscious and notice that she was different," she said of her daughter. "She goes to a small Catholic school and they are really careful about teasing and peer pressure." But there was one incident where a little boy made a comment that hurt her feelings.

Decapua learned about Barron's work from her sister, who read about him in a magazine. The family made two trips, a month apart, from their home in Greenfield, Ind., to meet with Barron. On the initial visit, he took measurements, made molds, noted coloring. Later, he did the final fitting and coloring touch-up. In the month between, he created Jacqueline an ear that looks like she was born with it.

"She is thrilled with her ear. She has it pierced," said her mother.

The ear is applied with an adhesive that keeps it on through Jacqueline's gymnastics practices and physical education classes.

"It's quite firmly in place," Decapua said. "We have the opposite problem, getting it off at night."

A long table in Barron's main workspace is covered with prostheses in different stages of completion and the tools of his trade. There are molds, blocks of wax, pieces of silicone and tubes of paint and small artists' brushes. A row of reference books on a shelf include Gray's Anatomy and Makeup for Theater and TV.

An Isotemp oven on another counter is used to cure and harden the silicone.

A prosthesis is created over a

series of visits and can include consultations with a client's doctors. Some projects are routinely simple; others, especially whole-face masks, are quite complex. Even in the projects he has done over and over, the difficult work is in the details. For instance, often, the ears he makes have tiny hairs placed in them. Barron laughs when he talks about a client who called him in distress because a barber, not knowing the man had a fake ear, clipped the ear hairs.

"The ear is such a delicate work of art," Barron said, handling a prosthesis he is working on. "Ear reconstruction surgery always falls short of anyone's expectations. There are too many

thin layers in the ear."

Office staff handle the numerous inquiries that come in about Barron's work since he has hit the limelight. He made a prosthesis for a victim of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon. He made a prosthesis for a Pakistani woman whose facial mutilation by her jealous husband drew international attention. With all the national attention, the backlog for new clients to get a prosthesis is three to four months.

The prosthetic devices can cost several thousand dollars or more and may have to be replaced every few years. Shepard's nose cost about \$5,000. Insurance often covers the cost of the devices, which can be a med-

ical necessity for some clients.

Pauline Milliner needs to have her prosthetic eye in place to breathe correctly, so it never comes out.

"It changed my whole life," said Milliner, 76, of her prosthesis.

Milliner was diagnosed with cancer of the sinus tract in the early 1980s. Sinuses are the air-filled cavities in the bones around the nose. Treatment for sinus cancer is typically surgery and radiation therapy.

Her surgery left a gaping hole where her eye used to be.

Her first prosthesis, she recalled, did little more than cover up the hole. It didn't look like an eye, she said. "I used to wear

dark glasses when I had that."

A friend sent her to a local doctor who made glass eyes. It turned out he could not help her, but he referred her to Barron.

That was years ago. She is on her second eye made by Barron.

"As I have aged, the hole has gotten bigger, so I had to have another one made," she said.

"My friends say they don't even notice" it's there. If anyone picks up on it, usually it is children, she said.

"They would say to me, 'What is the matter with your eye, you can't close it,' because I could not close it," Milliner said.

"I tell them exactly what happened. If you tell children the truth, they understand. The parents are surprised the children had the audacity to ask me."

With the eye, she said, she lives a normal life.

"It changes your whole attitude," she said.

On a certain level, there is shock and fascination about the work Barron does.

You could hear it in the gasps and murmurs of the science students at Randolph-Macon College this summer when Barron, a guest speaker, flipped through slides of clients for whom he has made prostheses. How can someone have a gaping hole in his or her head and still function? Or be so badly burned that nothing of a human face is recognizable and still function?

The images might repulse some, but Barron, never.

"I know what the outcome is going to be," he said. "I know how much it is going to change that person's life."

Joyce Chandler Cox learned of Barron's work from a cousin who'd read about him in a magazine. Cox was severely burned when a three-wheeled police vehicle turned over and caught fire, trapping her. She spent months recovering, regaining her strength and flexibility and re-learning to walk and eat.

"When you have an accident like that, it's hard at the beginning," Cox said. "I guess it gets easier as every day goes by. . . . I have had my whole family the whole time. That helped a lot."

Barron made her a full-face prosthesis a year ago. It is held on with a strap that goes around the back of the head, hidden by the hair. It is easy to put on and take off, she said. Does it make her look like she used to look?

Yes and no, she answers.

"You know a person will always remember how they looked before. Nobody can really make you look like you looked before," she said.

Nonetheless, she is pleased with it. But she finds it just as easy to put on individual prosthetic pieces — ears, a nose and a forehead patch. Barron is making ones to replace those she has now.

The prostheses allow her to live the normal life of a daughter and mother and not worry so much about unwanted attention.

It makes a big difference, she said, even though she isn't bothered by the stares the way she used to be.

"Just like I said, as time goes on, it gets easier," she said. "I still do everything I was doing before I got hurt. It hasn't stopped me."

Similarly, she no longer dwells on why the accident befell her.

"I questioned it, to myself," she said. "But stuff like that you are never really going to know the answer to. You just have to accept it."

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COURTESY ROBERT R. BARRON

A prosthetic ear meant Jacqueline Decapua (left) could wear earrings. Roland Sheppard (right) lost his nose to cancer.



Pauline Milliner lost her left eye to sinus cancer. A prosthetic finger joint slides on like a glove.