

How a master of disguise helped us

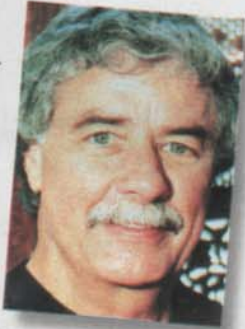
smile again



REBECCA GOODFIELD, AGE 19
Dog bit off half her ear



Robert Barron (right), a former CIA disguise expert, now uses his skills with prosthetics to help ordinary people – and is changing lives in a very different way



By Elaine Galloway

In the world of espionage, attention to detail is the difference between life and death – and no one understands that more than Robert Barron. When America's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) needed to give a spy a new identity to get him out of danger, Robert was the man they'd call. The disguise expert, from Ashburn, Virginia, was the best in the business. Using silicone masks and prosthetics, he could give an agent a new face so realistic no one would suspect it was fake – even in broad daylight. For more than 20 years, Robert's life

was the stuff of spy novels, filled with the secrecy and undercover work most of us only read about. Although he can never reveal details of his previous cases, his job took him round the world – and usually into the thick of the action. 'Yeah, it was dangerous,' says Robert, 62. 'I've been in places and situations where, if you're caught, you're on your own – the CIA doesn't know you.' When he retired from the job in 1993, his reputation as a brilliant prosthetics artist could have earned him a job as a Hollywood make-up specialist and made him extremely rich.

But Robert had different ideas. He was going to use his skills to change the lives of ordinary people. The idea came to him in 1985, as he was sitting in a medical conference in New York. 'The agency sent me to see if there were any materials or techniques used in medicine that could help us with our disguises,' says Robert. 'The conference lasted three days, but it was clear that we were actually five years ahead of them.' 'When I saw image upon image of people missing an ear because of a birth defect or their nose through cancer,

Robert has also helped...



PATTY RYAN, 46
Cancer of the eye



KATIE HARDY, 17
Failed ear reconstructive surgery



I knew I could help them more than the doctors could. I decided that was how I was going to spend my retirement.'

So when Robert retired from the CIA, he remembered his pledge. But sculpting prosthetics for medical patients was very different from making disguises. It wasn't just a case of fitting a mask over a face – there were real disfigurements to conceal and cavities to fill, so Robert had to learn a whole new range of techniques.

And there was a bigger problem to come – how to prove his background to prospective clients. 'Everything I'd ever done was sworn to secrecy,' says Robert. 'Most prosthetic sculptors have a portfolio of their work, but I had nothing. I couldn't show anyone the disguises I had made.'

However, a local cosmetic surgeon recognised his talent and artistic abilities. The attention to detail, such as the silicone noses with freckles and ears with tiny thread veins he produced, brought him many clients, enabling him eventually to set up his own clinic.

Rebecca Goodfield, 19, from Dunmore, Pennsylvania, was only 17 when her boyfriend's dog bit off half of her right ear. Although plastic surgeons offered her an operation, she felt that she couldn't go through with it.

'It sounded awful,' says Rebecca. 'They told me that the procedure would include having to shave the entire right side of my head and pulling down my scalp. I didn't want to go through that.'

'I didn't know what to do. I desperately wanted my ear to be back to normal. I felt extremely self-conscious because people would give me funny looks, and it was also affecting my hearing.'

Rebecca's fortunes changed when a family friend saw Robert on Oprah Winfrey's talk show and took down the details of his clinic, Custom Prosthetic Designs, in Ashburn, Virginia. After just one visit, Rebecca came away with a new prosthetic ear – and it looked eerily real.

'When I'm wearing it, most people can't even tell which one is fake,' says Rebecca.

But for Beverly Reighard, 69, from Jersey Shore in Pennsylvania, the transformation is even more amazing. She had cancer in her nose, and doctors had no choice but to cut from her upper lip to above her eyebrows, removing everything between her eyes. Beverly was left with a hole where her nose should be. Even breathing caused her excruciating pain as the flow of air hit the sensitive inner tissues. Any attempts at reconstruction led to one disappointment after another.

The final straw came when her great-granddaughter came to visit and was so

frightened by Beverly's appearance that she ran away and hid in a cupboard.

Then she heard about Robert's work. A long and arduous process followed her first consultation in May 2002, which included the search for the ideal model for Beverly's new nose, as well as countless fittings to perfect it.

Working alongside Dr Michael Singer, a dental expert specialising in replacing missing jaw structures, Robert was able gradually to reconstruct Beverly's face.

He created a temporary nose, which enabled Beverly to see her family without scaring them. And a permanent prosthesis, with the life-like qualities Robert is famous for, will be fitted this summer.

'There were times when I thought my life was over, but someone was watching over me,' Beverly says. 'It was a miracle that I found Robert. I could never thank him and Dr Singer enough.'

Robert may have missed out on the riches that working in Hollywood brings,

but there are no regrets – and still no cutting corners.

'In the CIA, the advanced disguises that I fabricated for agents kept them alive,' says Robert. 'I would never send someone into the field if the prosthesis didn't stand up to close scrutiny. If they had been discovered, they

could have been killed. If I wouldn't wear it myself in a life-threatening situation, I wouldn't give it to anyone else to put on.'

'My priorities now are just the same. I still want to meet people's expectations, but it's so that they are no longer embarrassed by the way they look.'

'My job in the CIA was to make a prosthesis so realistic that it could bring someone out of hiding without the fear of being recognised,' he says. 'I'm still doing that – but now I'm giving people the confidence to face the world again.'

'When I make a person smile because everything with their looks is the way it should be – that's my reward.'

■ For more information on Robert's clinic, visit www.prosthesis.com.

'Now I'm giving people the confidence to face the world again'



BEVERLY REIGHARD, 69
Cancer of the nose



More examples of Robert's work...



EMILY STEEL, 25
Ear microtia, birth defect



LOUISE KURTZ, 51
Pentagon burn survivor

