

About Town

By Rick Snider
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Alice Clayville attends church without worrying about people staring at her artificial eye. Melvin Ford picks up change with his prosthetic thumb. Ron King has an artificial eye after wearing a patch for 12 years.

When surgery can't repair a person's disfigurement, so-called medical sculptors create a body part realistic enough to fool a casual observer. These medical sculptors' laboratories have noses, ears, masks, fingers and eyes that otherwise might be found in a Hollywood special-effects studio.

Instead of preparing to fit actors for a sci-fi or horror film, these artists work with cancer patients, accident and burn victims or children with birth defects. Many of their clients are disfigured from multiple surgeries.

And their artwork is designed not to be noticed.

But chances are you've never heard of anaplastologists. The American Anaplastology Association, which has 220 members nationwide, says the trade requires no license and that most members concentrate on optical and dental restoration.

Robert Barron is the only anaplastologist in the Washington area who makes many different types of prostheses.

"There are only 20 good [medical sculptors] in the country, and Bob is as good as I've seen," says Professor Dennis Lee, who teaches prosthetics at the University of Michigan. "His colorations are incredible. He's a tremendous artist and sculptor."

An eyeball stares vacantly outward. A finger has hair and a nail. Ears include lobes and ridges.

The prostheses are so realistic that there are hints of veins below the surface. There are moles and wrinkles. The skin color matches the patients' own.

The laboratory in Mr. Barron's Oakton home has a chair like a dentist's. The room appears quite sterile. Like a doctor, Mr. Barron works in a white smock. But he's not a doctor, and he's quick to tell his clients so. Indeed, only a shelf of artificial eyes prevents one from opening wide and swatting the dentist's drill.

He sculpts not with clay, but with silicone or rubber materials that provide a soft, skinlike feel and are applied with medical adhesives.

Mr. Barron first makes an elastic mold. Using photographs of the patient, he duplicates skin color and facial contour based on the other side of the face. Sometimes, he sees a patient

before surgery, before he or she loses a body part, and works on preoperative casts and photos.

He then sculpts the prosthesis and colors it, using a rainbow of colors and variety of brushes. Sometimes it takes several days; sometimes several weeks. Sometimes, he awakens in the middle of the night to work on a prosthesis.

It depends on the complexity and the details. Detail is very important.

Mr. Barron spent two hours making a thumbprint for Melvin

right thumb in a work accident in 1979, the Dale City resident was surprised.

"I didn't think it would be this good," says Mr. Ford, who was fitted with his thumb in March. "Losing my thumb bothered me for awhile. I would knock over glasses or not be able to pick up things."

Such challenges and gratitude motivate Mr. Barron.

"A lot of people hide in their houses because their appearance is not natural," he says. "They are voluntary prisoners. My work has

to pass close scrutiny before I let [patients] walk around with it because shoddy work attracts attention, and that's the last thing I want."

Mr. Barron's lifelike artwork earned him early honors.

As a youth in Illinois, he won a blue ribbon at a state fair for a painting that judges mistook for a snapshot.

He started out as an artist and, until retiring last year, was a federal government worker, illustrating publications.

Mr. Barron lives with his wife, Carol, and 9-year-old son, Todd. His older son, Mark, 24, is a local computer specialist thinking about joining his father in anaplastology.

When Mr. Barron decided to expand into medical sculpturing, he trained under Mr. Lee at the University of Michigan, learning a form of art that requires knowledge of the anatomy and psychology as well.

"It's the main purpose of my life. It's why I exist," says Mr. Barron, 56, a member of the Center for Disfigured Children, a nonprofit group in Detroit. "The challenge excites me because you have to know something about everything in the process of making the prosthesis."

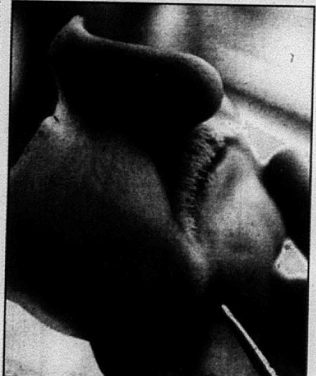
He consults almost daily with Mr. Lee — "because he wants it to be perfect," Mr. Lee says.

Mr. Barron, who greets clients like they're old friends, says he tries "to do as much for the psychological healing as anything traditional medicine offers. I try to give them a positive image."

That's because for many people with prostheses, losing a body part also means loss of self-esteem.

Some have never considered being fitted because of costs. But insurers usually pay for restorative, not cosmetic, surgery. Alice Clayville, 78, lost her left eye to cancer in 1991. She used to worry.

Dr. Michael Hughes, an ocularist who shares an office in Vienna with Mr. Barron, made her an artificial one, while Mr. Barron created the surrounding



Robert Barron examines a lower-face prosthesis that he has made and is painting with a variety of colors and brushes.

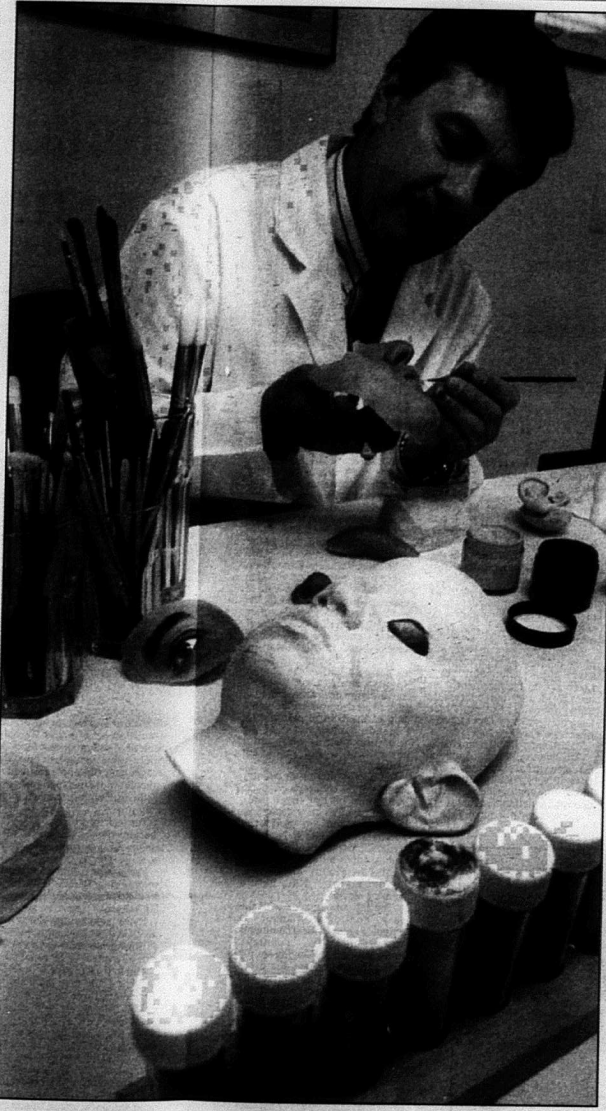
Creating lifelike prostheses is specialist's healing art



The surrounding tissue that Mr. Barron creates for an artificial eye makes it more lifelike.

Ford. "It's more realistic that way," Mr. Barron says. "He's going to appreciate it more if he has a fingerprint."

Indeed, Mr. Ford, 61, did. A retired crane worker who lost his

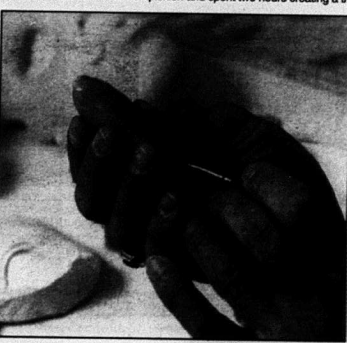


Robert Barron creates prosthetic body parts for clients disfigured by accidents or surgery. "There are only 20 good [medical sculptors] in the country, and Bob is as good as I've seen," says the professor who taught Mr. Barron.

Just like before



Robert Barron paints Melvin Ford's prosthetic thumb (above) and another client's artificial finger (below). He strives to match a client's complexion and spent two hours creating a thumbprint for Mr. Ford.



tissue. Mrs. Clayville's fear that friends would notice ended after church service one afternoon.

"When you look in the mirror and see two eyes, it makes you feel better," says Mrs. Clayville, who lives in Chincoteague, Va. "Some of my friends say they don't know how I can stand it, but you have to go on with your life."

"My two longtime friends didn't even notice," she says. "The match was perfect."

Ron King, 32, had worn a patch since losing his left eye to cancer in 1982. The Johnstown, Pa., construction worker never expected to have an artificial eye.

"When I first lost the eye, my doctor told me the things they were making then weren't nice," he says. "I looked into it last June after reading an article about it. I was really surprised it was so realistic. It's not noticeable."