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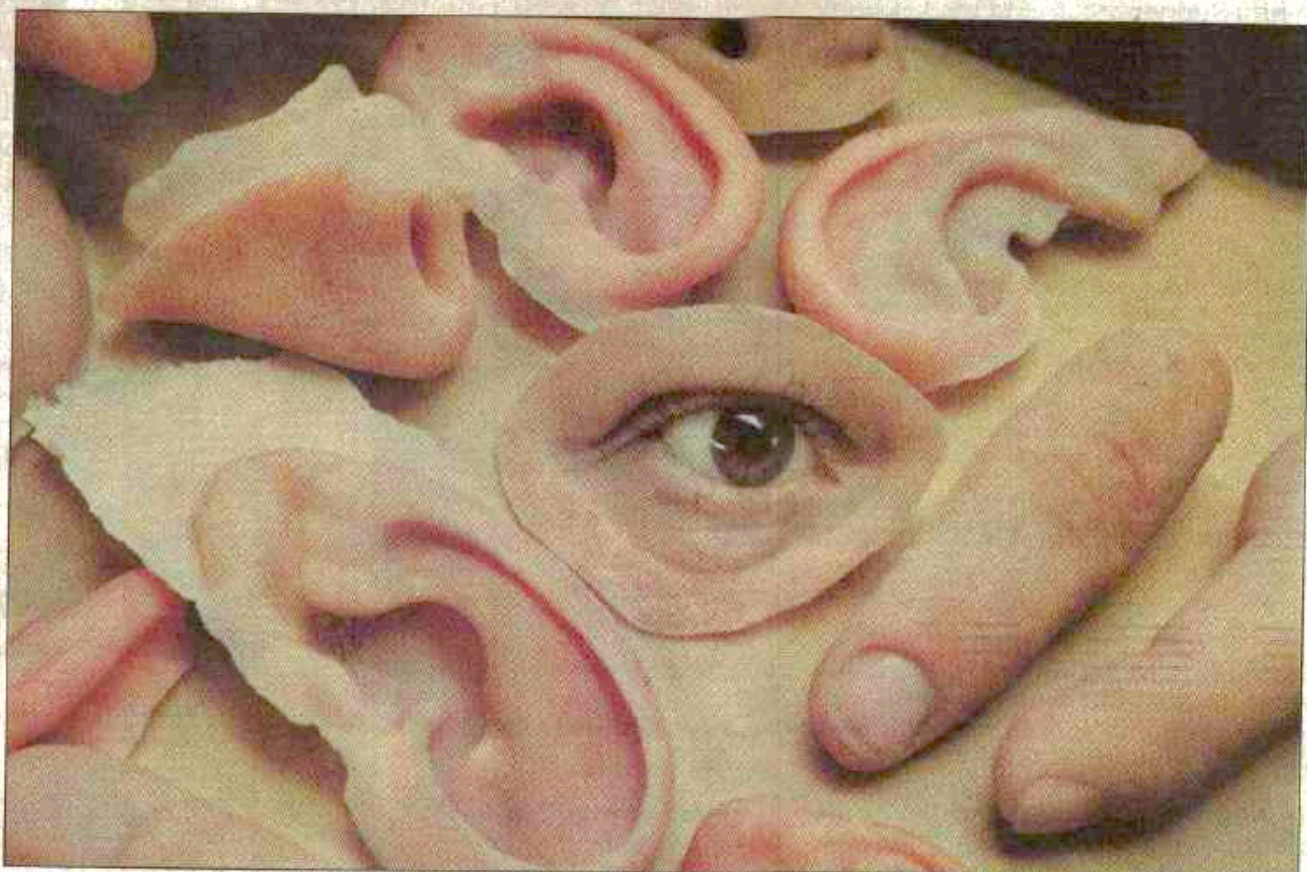
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Style

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PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WILLIAMSON—THE WASHINGTON POST

Some of Robert Barron's amazingly lifelike ears, eyes, noses and fingers sit in a box on a workbench in his lab. His extraordinary attention to detail means that the noses have pores, the ears have hairs and the fingers even have a little dirt under the nails.

Crafting Hope

Prosthetic Sculptor Robert Barron Is Spending His Retirement Giving People New Beginnings

By PHIL MCCOMBS
Washington Post Staff Writer

The journey of a human soul from dust to dust can be a bumpy ride, and so it's been for Beverly Reighard of the little town of Jersey Shore, Pa.

The extent of Bev's difficulty was summed up last March in an e-mail her husband, Gary, sent to a prosthetic sculptor named Robert Barron in Northern Virginia:

"My wife had cancer in her nose and was cut from her upper lip to above her eyebrows. They took everything between her eyes."

Could Barron, he wondered, remake her face?

For 20 years, Gary Reighard had been Jersey Shore's chief of police. Before that, he'd been a soldier in Korea, a railroad clerk, a baseball umpire. He met Bev in 1969 working as a stock man at the Sylvania plant, where she was packing flashbulbs. She waitressed, too, with Gary's mother at Joe's Seafood House, at the Antlers, and at the Elks Club.

They married in 1971, and by the time Gary retired in 1999 they were ready to relax and do some traveling.

But by the summer of 2000, Bev's nose was swollen and painful and they began a different kind of journey.

Thirty-six weeks of radiation did no good. The tumor got bigger. It ate her nose. It ate parts of her throat, her sinuses. It ate through the roof of her mouth.

When doctors finally operated March 21, 2001, Bev was on the table eight hours and caught hospital pneumonia. She was two months in intensive care, five weeks in rehab.

Then she went home. She couldn't eat. She couldn't talk. She was nearly blind from cataracts that couldn't be treated just then. She was

in pain. She had only one thing to hang on to—Gary. Even though a doctor had urged him not to bring her home, saying he wouldn't be able to bear it, Gary stuck by her every minute of the day and night.

"It was," he recalls, "a low time for both of us. We didn't have no picnic."

In the months that followed, they began navigating the arcane world of reconstructive medicine. A dentist made a prosthetic upper jaw that enabled Bev to eat soft foods after months on tube-fed liquids.

But her lower denture wasn't right, and the dentist couldn't fix it. Worse, a prosthetic nose the dentist ordered from out of state didn't fit, either. It was so heavy it fell off in a restaurant the first time Bev tried it in public.

"Fell right on the table," Gary recalls. People stared.

Without prosthetics, Bev's face had a big pink cavity in the middle with her eyes perched on the edges and, below, a dangling flap of flesh—her upper lip. Airflow over the tender inner tissues caused excruciating pain. She kept a gauze pad over the cavity.

In addition, without a functioning nose and mouth Bev had to continue breathing through a tracheotomy tube that often hurt so much it made her weep.

A visiting great-granddaughter, seeing her, burst into tears and hid in a closet.

Bev considered suicide.

Then one day a friend mentioned a magazine article on Barron, who was gaining a national reputation for making prosthetic noses, ears, eyes, fingers—even whole-face masks—that were both realistic and medically helpful.

Gary fired off his e-mail. Barron called a few days later. "I think," he said gently, "I may be able to help your wife."

Though it seemed



Barron, right, holds an early "test nose" on Beverly Reighard, who lost much of her face to cancer, while prosthetic dentist Michael Singer, left, prepares to make some adjustments.

See FACE, F4, Col. 1

The Miracle Man



Barron checks the details on a finger he is creating for a client.

FACE. From F1

scarcely imaginable in their dark hour of despair, the Reighards were about to embark on an adventure with a craftsman whose skills had been honed during years of dangerous undercover work as a master of disguise for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Barron's feats were "legend," a CIA spokesman confirms. His "artistic skills were unmatched," former CIA director James Woolsey wrote in awarding the Career Intelligence Medal at Barron's 1993 retirement:

"He was the impetus of the advanced disguise system and the ideal by which all other disguise officers are judged. . . . His creativity [was] extremely instrumental in . . . what the silicone mask is today."

Silicone, which can be tinted to look like flesh, came into wide use in the 1970s. Barron could make a Caucasian CIA operative appear Chinese with a mask so realistic the agent could pass undetected within a few feet of a border guard in bright sunlight.

Nothing in Hollywood even came close.

Now, in retirement, Barron was emerging from the shadows of international espionage, putting a new face on his own identity by revealing "a tender streak," as his former CIA supervisor, Herbert F. Saunders, put it, "that none of us suspected he had."

When Gary first drove Bev the 217 miles from Jersey Shore to meet Barron in a Bethesda dental office last May 4—a trip they'd repeat dozens of times—they were touched by a feeling so long-forgotten that it seemed new:

Hope.

The Body Shop

"Hold on!" Barron shouts to a visitor. "I'm in a crisis!"

He's hunched over Bev's silicone nose in the basement shop of his house in Ashburn, trimming with a scalpel. Meanwhile, a prosthetic ear is baking in the oven, and the phone is ringing.

This is the headquarters of Custom Prosthetic Designs—an array of workbenches cluttered with copies of body parts.

They look astonishingly real.

"I've got a shoulder amputation over there," Barron notes. "Here's a couple of ears I just finished. Here's an eye—orbital, with ocular piece. A finger. I get a lot of finger amputations."

He hopes to make fingers for Louise Kurtz, the Pentagon civilian who lost hers to fire in the Sept. 11 attack, and for whom—working with plastic surgeon Craig Dufresne—he's already made silicone ears.

"They're extremely lifelike," Kurtz says. "He's really helped fill the voids in my life." Mike, her husband, says Barron "is a kind-spirited individual with a true desire to help."

Recently, working with one of Dufresne's nurses, Barron has begun fashioning nipples for breast cancer victims. ("Wow," says a recipient. "I can't wait to take these babies out on a test run.")

When he presented Audrey Brown of Woodford, Va., with an artificial eye to replace an inferior prosthetic she's worn since her 1966 cancer surgery, she was thrilled.

"It looks natural, wonderful!" Brown says. Added a daughter in a voice mail to Barron: "It's so nice to see my mother without her dark glasses for the first time in 30 years."

"That," Barron says, "is the kind of thing that just keeps me going."

The children touch him most deeply. He's made ears for many afflicted with microtia, a congenital deformity.

"I love it," says 12-year-old Ashley Karst of Herman, Minn., of the replacement Barron made for the "nub" she was born with. "Before, people would . . . look strange at me, like I'm dumb or something."

(Kim Williams of Chicago paid surgeons \$30,000 to fix her son's ear, but nine operations left it "lumpy and deformed." For less than a quarter that amount, she says, Barron made an "eerily real" ear and "covered up the scars and the ugliness of the surgeries.")

(Addis her son, Dakota Forth, 11; "My school pictures look so much better!")

Most arresting, perhaps, are Barron's full-face masks, mounted on frames on a workbench.

One is for Joyce C. Cox, a Richmond parking meter tender who lost her ears, nose and most of her facial



Barron examines pictures of Beverly Reighard that were taken before she lost her nose and upper jaw to cancer.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL WILLIAMS FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

skin when her vehicle burned in 1998. She had 49 operations before she could consider prostheses.

Her mask, still in progress, seems so lifelike it's as if Joyce herself is in the workshop, watching.

"Bob's a good guy and he's really helping me out," she says. "He gives people a chance to have a life again, to have a better attitude about themselves." Her husband, John, agrees but adds, "It's always her inner beauty I see when I look at her."

One of Barron's most challenging feats was helping Zahida Parveen, a pregnant Pakistani mother of four whose jealous husband, in a 1999 spasm of "honor violence," cut off her nose and ears and poked out her eyes.

With Dufresne and maxillofacial prosthodontist Michael T. Singer—the dentist Barron is working with on Bev's nose—he helped restore her former beauty.

(She'd never see her baby, Parveen was quoted as saying, but at least the child would see her mother as almost normal.)

Though prostheses have been around since ancient times, and spectacular improvements have been made by modern surgeons working with medical artists like Barron (called anaplastologists), the ex-CIA man is in a class by himself in creating realistic illusions.

"In the CIA," he explains, "agents depended on the realism to keep them alive. Now I'm so happy I can continue doing this work. People call me, and they're crying. 'Please, can you make this look like a real ear?'"

A ferocious perfectionist, Barron works seven days a week, often late into the night. Using various clays, plasters and chemicals, he first takes an impression of the damaged area, makes a mold and casts a replica.

Then he does the same with a healthy substitute—for a bad ear, he'll copy the other ear and sculpt a mirror image by hand.

It's tremendously labor-intensive. The process may be repeated many times before Barron begins fitting the prosthetic to the patient—also a long, intricate process of trimming, adjusting, trying again.

Finally, Barron tints the prosthetic to blend with the patient's skin tones, adding what appear to be the nearly invisible spider veins and blemishes that flesh is heir to.

In Bev's case, the nose he's working on today is one of dozens he's fashioned in the quest for perfection.

At first Bev's niece Kathy Miele had volunteered her nose as a model. Barron had made a replica, tried it. Not quite right.

Then one day he appeared with another nose in the little cardboard box of implements he carries to appointments.

"Oh," Bev exclaimed. "What a cute little nose!"

Barron smiled. He'd found the model with just the blend of flair and practicality you'd expect of an ex-CIA officer.

In a lineup of women in his neighborhood.

A Lifetime of Makeup Exams

Barron, 60, is a handsome man with a salt-and-pepper mustache, a full head of hair and a twinkle in his eye. When he's been featured on TV, women have sent e-mails offering to marry him. He's the kind of guy who jokes around and tries to appear casual, but always you can sense the intensity humming just beneath the surface.

The first of three children of a small-town Illinois clothing store owner and housewife, Barron studied commercial art at Southern Illinois University and once thought he'd work for Hallmark. Pious and churchgoing as a kid (he's still both), he was also a bit

of a hell-raiser—a duality he dealt with by enlisting in the Marine Corps in 1965.

He got out in 1968 after serving in Okinawa and went to work as an illustrator of military magazines at the Pentagon. One day, upset because his parking space was so far from the building, he forged a special permit and began parking up close with the generals. Someone turned him in, and at the trial the judge called him to the bench and whispered:

"Damn good forgery." Two weeks later, the CIA called.

Barron started out in forgery, moved up to the disguise branch and soon was traveling the world. Moscow, China, Ethiopia, Bulgaria, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Somalia, Kuwait, Japan, South America. His house is filled with mementos. An Order of Lenin medal. An official KGB beer opener.

He traveled on faked passports of several countries, with fake papers and "pocket litter" to match. "I've been in places where, if you're caught, you're on your own. The CIA doesn't know you." He declines to give specifics, but Saunders, who hired him in 1969 in what became the Office of Technical Service (the agency's "James Bond component"), sums it up:

"A cable comes in: 'We've got a dicey situation, we want the best possible disguise, please send Barron.' We had half a dozen disguise guys, but Bob was at or near the top. We called them technicians, but he was an artist."

"Was it dangerous? Any time you go to a funny foreign country and meet funny people in a funny little hotel and work on a guy who's about to go on a funny little mission—yeah, it's dangerous."

At Langley, Barron was a cutup. People at staff parties found themselves chomping into silicone cookies—with real chocolate chips. When then-Attorney



Right, Joyce Cox studies her full-face mask before trying it on for the first time. Above, Barron adjusts the mask. Cox, who lost her ears, nose and most of her facial skin in a fire in 1998, had 49 operations before she could consider prostheses.



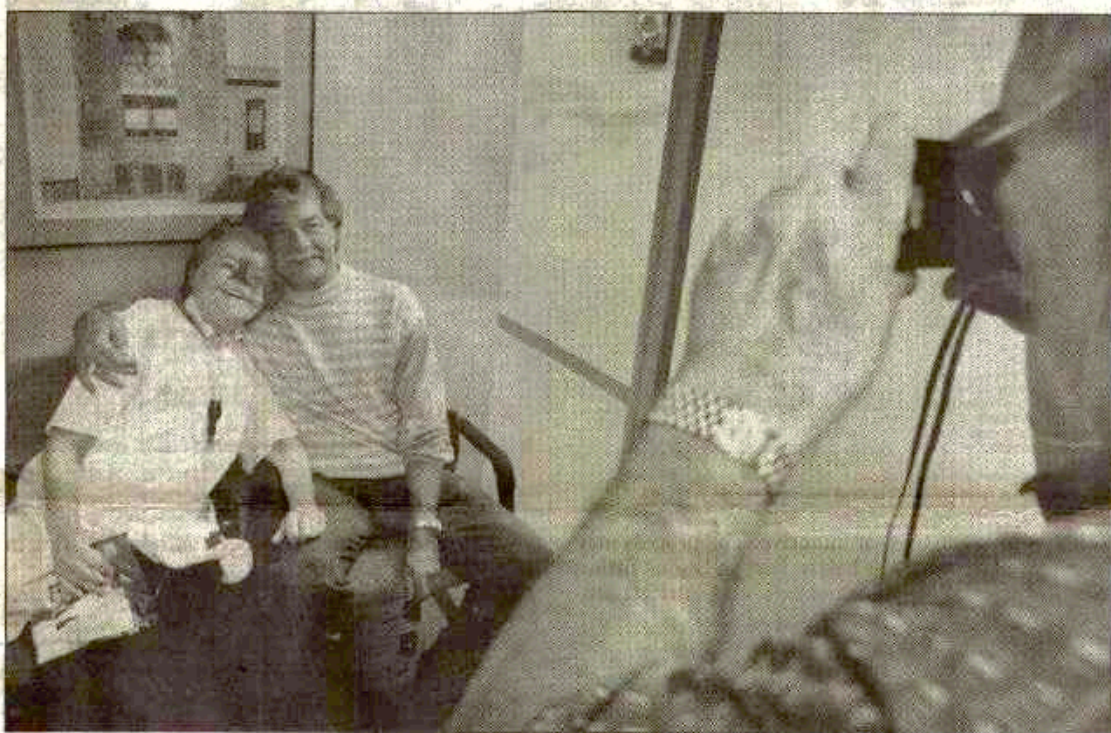


Gary and Beverly Reighard. Her nose is only the latest one of dozens Barron fashioned for her in his quest for perfection. The final, perfect prosthetic nose will not be ready until next June.



Beverly wanted a nose mostly so she wouldn't frighten her great-grandchildren, one of whom, 10-month-old Sarah Miller, got up close at the Christmas party.

Beverly Reighard and her new nose have a coming-out party in time for Christmas. Jennifer Miller, wife of Beverly's grandson, said she couldn't resist touching her nose.



Barron poses with Beverly Reighard for a photo being taken by her husband, Gary.

General Janet Reno visited Barron, wearing a mask that made him look like someone else, sidled up to her and, Hollywood-style, ripped it off his face. Her security detail was not amused.

As silicone's lifelike advantages over rubber and polyurethane became apparent, the era of simple mustache-and-wig disguises passed. The CIA sent Barron to study anatomy and biomedical sculpture at a university, and to apprentice under the late John Chambers, the Hollywood makeup genius famous for his 1968 work on "Planet of the Apes."

With Barron's help, CIA disguises were soon years ahead of Hollywood's. There was motivation: Espionage wasn't fantasy, but serious business in which an unrealistic eyebrow or false skin tone could be fatal.

While his adventuresome career suited Barron in some respects, his soulful side wanted something more. In 1984, attending a conference of biomedical sculptors for the CIA, he had an epiphany.

They were watching slides of people disfigured by disease. "I knew then, when I saw these poor people and the torment and humiliation they had to go through because of their disfigurement, that it would be really nice to help heal them."

He decided to devote his retirement years to this, rather than "going to Hollywood and getting rich."

"I guess the good Lord saved me all along so He could use me to help others," Barron muses. "There's a purpose in life. When I was young and death-defying in the agency, I didn't think of my work that way—till people would say, 'Thanks for saving my life.'"

"Now I'm conscious of my purpose. Deep down, I'm still wild and mostly out of control—but this work keeps me under control. . . . There's no better feeling than to help someone who's been dealt a difficult hand, to give them hope, to make their day go a little easier."

Recently Saunders was visiting and, as a pair of tough old spooks will, they were reminiscing about the old days when Barron had to take time out for an ear patient.

"It was a beautiful little blond gal, about 12," Saunders recalls, "and she'd been through a dozen operations that hadn't done any good. Bob had fashioned this little ear for her, and stuck a little gold earring on it."

"When she held up the mirror, this huge smile broke out and tears came down her face. Her mother cried. We all cried."

"Her mother said, 'This is a miracle.'"

Fitting in

Beverly Reighard smiles cheerfully as she sits jauntily in her wheelchair, one arm cocked over the back, in the waiting room of Michael Singer's Bethesda dental office. The gauze pad is taped onto her face.

It's a few Saturdays before Christmas and Gary is with her, as he's been on more than 20 of these week-end visits, calling her "Hon" and "Bevvie," adjusting her oxygen tank, clearing her tracheotomy apparatus when its gurgles interfere with her speech.

"I just want you looking normal and happy," he tells her. "I've seen how you suffered from Day One."

"I'm going to have a nose for Christmas," she chuckles.

Suddenly, Barron breezes in with the cardboard box under his arm—it contains the latest version of Bev's nose—and Singer summons everyone inside.

As Bev reclines in the dental chair, Singer and Barron hover over her, checking the nose's fit.

Singer also checks the underlying plastic inserts—upper jaw, lower denture, and connecting vertical piece—that he's painstakingly crafted and adjusted over months.

"All right, that worked out pretty good," Barron observes. "It looks believable now!"

"Bev, you're going to look good for Christmas," Singer says.

But Bev has a question: "Dr. Singer, will the hurtin' quit?"

It will, he assures her—because when the nose finally fits, there will be a perfect seal and she'll be able to breathe through it normally without air irritating sensitive inner tissues.

It's clear watching a half-dozen of these weekend sessions why Bev's first dentist failed to get the job done with a couple of appointments and a mail-order nose. As Singer puts it, this kind of facial reconstruction is a "huge undertaking," requiring innumerable fitting appointments plus countless hours of lab work by himself and Barron.

Further, the adjustments that must be made are so intricate that it's best if the prosthodontist and anaplastologist work side by side, discussing every detail as they go.

"I'll skive that down a little," Barron says when Singer points to a spot where the nose doesn't quite feather perfectly into Bev's cheek.

Off comes the nose, and Barron starts whittling on it while Singer rushes to his lab to make a corresponding adjustment to a plastic insert. Then Singer returns, and they try again.

And again.

Like Barron, Singer works seven days a week and late at night. Until his 1997 retirement as an Army colonel, he was chief of prosthodontics and director of the cranial and facial pain clinic at Walter Reed Army Medical Center.

"You've got to care a lot, and put in the hours," he says of patients like Bev. "It's tremendously rewarding, because these people are in hell, and you change their lives."

Singer and Barron won't be finished with Bev until next June, after a Baltimore surgeon under Singer's supervision implants titanium posts in her forehead and jaw to hold her whole prosthetic structure firm.

Then, Barron will produce the final version of her nose. He's told Gary his fee will be less than \$9,000, and Singer will charge less than \$7,000. "Worth every penny," in Gary's view.

"I'm scared, but I'm going to do it," Bev says of the operation.

"Bevvie, you're a tiger!" Gary says. "It gives her something to look forward to," Singer confides, "because when we finish it will all fit tightly and just be a wonderful thing for her. Bob and I are really still just in the formative stages, learning how to make it work."

Now they're sprinting to give her a realistic temporary nose for Christmas, to be held in place by her glasses.

"So I won't look like a freak!" Bev says. She wants to hold her great-grandchildren without scaring them.

Thus it is that Barron now gets out his paints and brushes and hovers over Bev. With palette held high in one hand, he dabs daintly at her nose—all versions to this point have been somewhat gray—to make it match her skin.

He seems to dance around Bev—now on this side, now on the other, cocking his head, dabbing.

Suddenly, Bev's nose looks real. Her face looks normal.

She seems to glow, as if touched by the brush of Michelangelo himself.

"Whadaya think, chief?" Barron asks. "I'll tell you," Gary murmurs, "that really blended in there nice." He hands his wife a mirror. "Here, hon, take a look."

Bev looks, and exclaims in a most earthy and understandable way: "Holy crap! Oh, yeah. I look good!"

She looks and smiles. Looks some more. "Oh, that's beautiful. It looks like my nose!"

And after she's breathed through it awhile: "I can't believe it doesn't hurt!"

Finally, as they're about to leave: "I could cry. I'm so happy. I can't wait to go to a restaurant!"

Taking It on the Road

Jersey Shore, founded centuries ago by people who must have had a sense of humor, is a town of 4,600 set among rolling hills in the middle of Pennsylvania. The Reighards had started out in a trailer park and then moved downtown. Now they have a pleasant hilltop Colonial overlooking a bend in the Susquehanna.

Bev is 69 now, Gary 64. It's been a long haul. "We've worked hard for what we've got," Gary says. The house is filled with comfy old furniture, knickknacks, gifts from family and friends. Gary, out of habit, keeps police radios going day and night, upstairs and down. He collects antique clocks. Bev collects stuffed bears. And dolls.



Boulder naps as his master checks the tint of a client's prosthetic ear in the basement shop of his Ashburn home.

Perfect porcelain dolls, dressed in colorful costumes, fill the living room. They're on the furniture, the floor, in cabinets. "I just love them," Bev says. "I think they're beautiful." She started collecting them well before her medical problems began.

She's sitting at the kitchen table now, smiling, her new nose almost seamlessly in place. Since it won't be medically perfect till June, she's still breathing through the tracheotomy tube. A long plastic hose snakes from her throat across the floor to a big oxygen tank. Smaller tanks for travel and other medical supplies are positioned around the house.

"I'd die before being in a nursing home," Bev vows. "I don't want that, and I know she doesn't," Gary adds.

They recall a friend abandoned by her husband after becoming ill.

"I thought, 'Oh my God, what if that happened to me,'" Bev says. "But when we decided to have the operation, Gary said he'd be with me. He'd never leave me. And that's the way it's been."

"Everybody said you couldn't do what I'm doing," Gary says. "But I made up my mind that whatever it takes is what I'll do."

Bev made up her mind, too: "I had to live for my husband and kids and grandkids and great-grandkids. And I don't dare give up because if I give up, Gary will give up."

It's Christmas Eve. Bev has waited till now to take her nose out on a test run, and she's eager.

Though their children have moved out of state—the great-granddaughter who ran from her is in Texas—one grandson, Shane Miller, lives nearby with his wife and three kids.

"Ready?" Gary asks. Bev dons an elegant red jacket with an angel pin given her by a 94-year-old woman they'd met at a Perkins restaurant on that last trip home from Bethesda. She's also got a pin with a picture of Jesus given to her by Shane's 9-year-old son, Cameron.

"Ready?" she says. And they're off—to an afternoon and evening of fun they'd never dreamed of experiencing again.

Everyone is stunned, thrilled. "Wow! Are we cool or what?" exclaims their old friend Evie Buttorff as Bev walks boldly into Buttorff Pro Hardware.

They embrace in a bear hug. At Shane's house, his wife, Jennifer, exclaims, "Oh, my gosh! It looks so good I can't believe it."

"I like it," Cameron says with a shy smile. Inside, over cookies and glazed ham, little Sarah, 10 months old, sits on her great-grandmother's lap and coos.

Soon, everyone is talking about this and that. They've forgotten entirely about Bev's nose—which, in a strange and wonderful way, heralds her return to a semblance of normality.

Bev and Gary end the day at a big party at another relative's house.

Her sister Mary Miele and nieces and nephews and others are all happy for her, and incredulous at the realism of Bob Barron's work.

"It looks perfectly normal," marvels Skip Stine. "It's amazing how close your nose is to what it used to be."

"Yup, I got what I wanted!" Bev says with a grin. "I got my nose back."

Circle of Survivors

The journey of a human soul toward its true identity lasts a lifetime, and it hasn't been a picnic for Bob Barron, either.

Married to his work, he went through a couple of divorces—one fairly recently.

After retirement, he got cancer and suffered a traumatic operation. "We're all survivors," is all he'll say of that.

So mostly he works, drifts to the Ashburn Pub some nights to unwind, scarcely ever sets sail in that nice boat he bought a few years back. Sundays, he always makes church.

He smiles. Life's good. He's got a purpose. The cancer seems gone. He just became a grandpa.

For that matter, his family is becoming quite large—now that it's expanded to include people like Bev and Gary, Singer and Dufresne, Ashley and Dakota, Joyce and John, Louise and Mike, Audrey and her daughter, Zahida and her children.

All made in the Creator's image.

For more information, visit www.prosthesis.com.