

# Miracles in Ashburn

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**ALL EARS:** Various facial prosthetics sit in a wooden box in Robert Barron's Ashburn office.



Times-Mirror Staff Photos/Jason Hornick

**FINISHING TOUCH:** Robert Barron works on tinting a prosthetic nose for Betty Holcomb, who flew in from Kentucky, in his Ashburn office.

## Spy-artist-turned-prosthetist brings joy

BY ANNE KEISMAN  
Times-Mirror Staff Writer

Betty sits motionless as the artist carefully puts the finishing touches on his work. Her eyes sparkle with anticipation.

All the accouterments for his trade stand sentinel over the scene: paint, brushes, palettes — even an oven to fire clay.

Bob Barron stops and steps a few feet back. He nods. He puts his paintbrush down.

"Betty?" he says. "I have something to show you."

Betty Holcomb has flown all the way from Kentucky to Virginia for this moment.

Barron presents her with a mirror. What she beholds in its reflection is an attractive woman in her 70s — with tears in her eyes.

"I can't believe it's me," she says.

Barron, in a few short sessions with Betty in his

Ashburn laboratory, has given her back what two bouts of skin cancer took away.

Betty's cancer is in remission now, but part of her nose has been missing for more than 20 years.

Thanks to the latest technology of prosthesis and the artistry of Bob Barron, who spent 24 years in the CIA disguising secret agents, Betty now has a new nose made out of silicon.

Barron's extreme attention to detail makes it nearly impossible to tell the appendage is fake. Even doctors have been fooled. This is because, for most of his career, his perfectionism kept people alive.

"The realism I put into my work has to pass my close scrutiny," he said. "[The agent's] life depended on the realism of the disguise — and I wasn't about to live with someone not making it because of me."

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# BARRON

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Since retiring from the "Mission: Impossible" world of top secret operations, Barron has used his unique set of skills to start his business, Custom Prosthetic Designs in Ashburn.

"It occurred to me — if I can put someone in hiding, maybe I can take them out of hiding," said Barron.

Betty refers to Barron as her "guardian angel," delivering her from the humiliation of people's stares and whispers. She calls him "Doctor," even though he has no degree.

"I was so self-conscious," she said. "Kids pointed at me. Bless their hearts, they don't know any better. But it hurts."

Now, she says, she can go out in public and fear nothing.

"Maybe I'll get a boyfriend," she says with a smile.

Betty is one of hundreds of people helped by Barron, who has appeared on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and "Montel," and been the subject of countless articles in national magazines.

"The good Lord gave me the talent. He's using me — going through me — to help others," he said.

Barron's artistic, meticulous nature revealed itself early in his life.

When he was a child in DuQuoin, Ill., he entered an oil painting of the Grand Canyon into the state fair's art competition. After he arrived at the contest, he was dismayed when he didn't see his painting on display.

It turned out the painting was so realistic the judges thought it was an entry for the photography competition. It had won a blue ribbon.

After several years in the Marines, Barron followed his creative drive and became art director for Direction, a magazine published at the Pentagon. Ironically, it was there that the direction of his own life changed forever.

Annoyed at how far he was forced to walk from his parking space to the Pentagon building, he manufactured a fake parking pass to gain closer access.

A co-worker squealed, and Barron was ticketed \$50 for his clever ruse. A few days later, he got a call from the CIA.

It seems the judge who fined Barron was so impressed with his forgery skills, he sent over the parking pass for inspection by the top forgers in the U.S. government.

And so Barron began his journey mastering the art of illusion, culminating in his position as senior disguise specialist with the CIA.

Now his office in Ashburn is stacked with photo albums, documenting his patients' transformations.

After Barron appeared on national television for the first time, his e-mail in-box exploded with messages from people seeking his help.

Betty was one of those people. She saw Barron for the first time on "Montel" in February. She said she didn't plan to watch it that day because she thought Montel's regular psychic — someone she didn't care for — was scheduled.

"Something told me to turn on the television," she said. What she saw astounded her. Could Barron do the same for her?

Before accepting Betty, Barron asked her to send photographs of her disfigurement — as he does with all his patients.

The latest technology allows Barron to sculpt lightweight appendages that the patient affixes with adhesive every morning. In a short time it becomes as reflexive as brushing your teeth.

He paints the silicon to match the surrounding tissue, adding veins and blemishes for authenticity.

Plastic surgeons work in tandem with Barron to restore fingers, eyes, noses, skin and ears to victims of fire, car accidents and birth defects.

The cost depends on the complexity of the prosthesis, but many times medical insurance will cover it, Barron said.

He strives to make the experience comfortable — even enjoyable — for his patients.

When patients come from out of town to see Barron, he sends Jerry Jones, a limo driver, to pick them up at the airport.

"A lot of people have never

been in a limo before. It's my treat to them," said Jones, who said he tries to put Barron's patients at ease before they arrive.

Jones said it is a joy to see their trepidation turn into happiness, confidence and relief after Barron's treatments.

"I am so happy even to be associated with him," said Jones.

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