

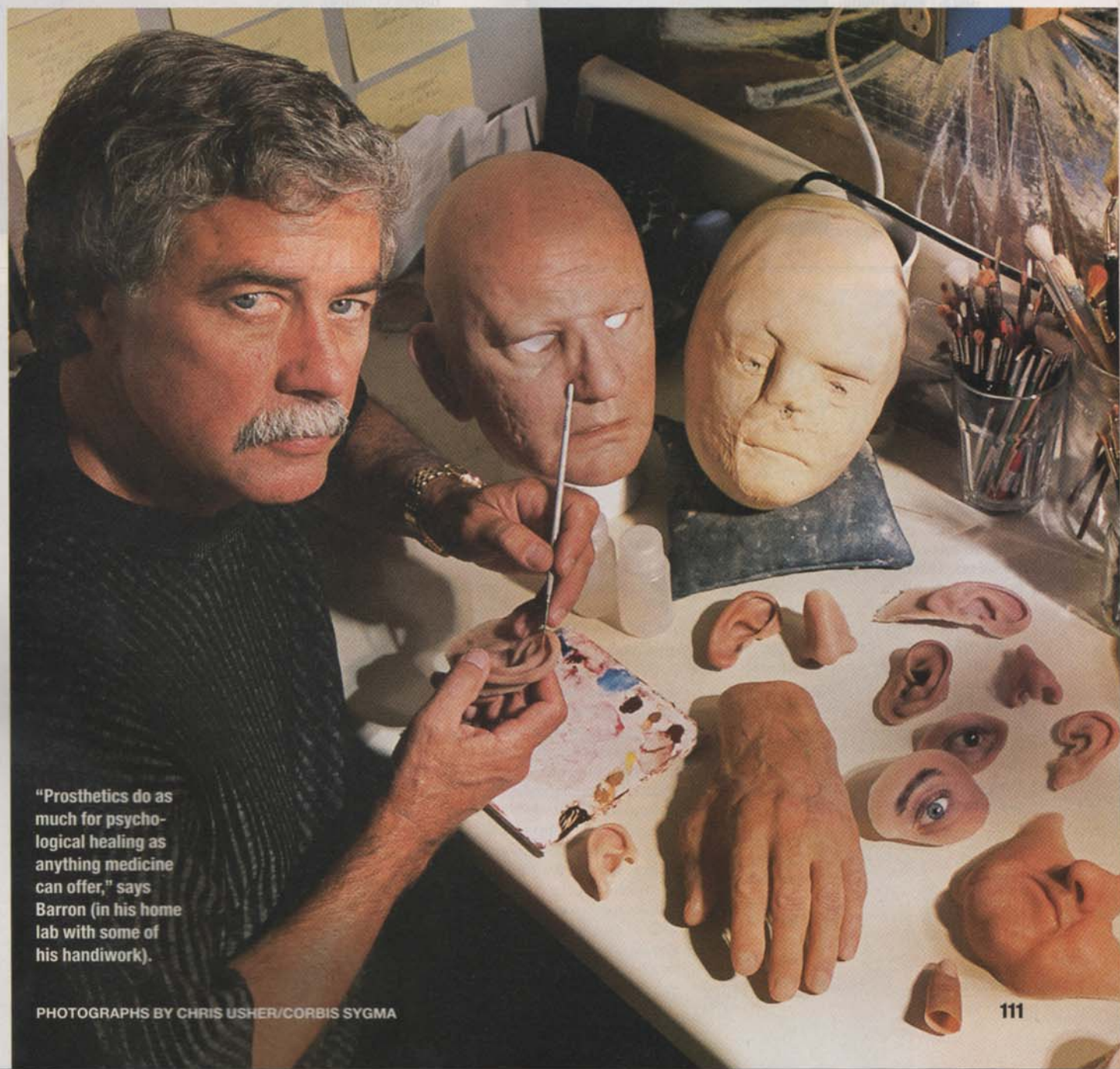
# Making Faces

Already an expert at crafting disguises for CIA agents, Robert Barron now creates ears, noses and other lifelike body parts for people in need

**F**or the first six years of her life, Angela Aretz of St. Petersburg, Fla., wasn't much bothered by having only one ear. Since both ear canals were intact, the birth defect didn't affect her hearing, and her peers had never mocked her. Then, at a birthday party in May 2000, Angela's father, Thomas, heard a child say to his daughter, "Oh my God, where's your ear?" After

the party Angela burst into tears. Says Thomas, 53, a financial planner: "I told myself, 'This will never happen to her again.'"

Thanks to Robert Barron, it never has. A former CIA officer who spent 15 years creating disguises for undercover American operatives, Barron, 59, has parlayed his spy-hiding talents into a career as one of the most sought-



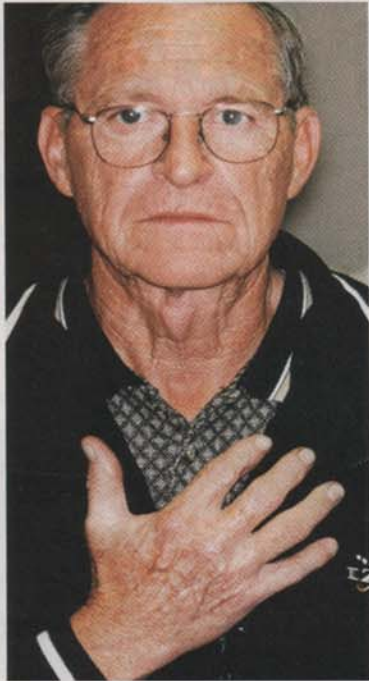
"Prosthetics do as much for psychological healing as anything medicine can offer," says Barron (in his home lab with some of his handiwork).

● helping hands



COURTESY ROBERT BARRON/US

**Ray Young**  
 "It's hard to use a typewriter or computer when you only have nine fingers," says Young, who lost most of his right ring finger in a 1999 accident. His Barron-made replacement, he adds, "does everything I want it to."



**Pauline Milliner**  
 After losing an eye and surrounding tissue to cancer, "I went through life looking like Long John Silver," says Milliner. Today, thanks to Barron's art, "I'm like a new woman."



after anaplastologists, or makers of prostheses, in the country. Using silicone, plaster molds and clay, he crafts ears, eyes, noses, fingers or even whole faces for dozens of accident victims, cancer patients and people with birth defects each year.

So true to life are his works that from as close as a foot away only an expert can tell they aren't the real thing. "I've never seen anyone do them better," says Michael Singer, a Bethesda dentist and fellow anaplastologist—one of about 75 in the U.S.—who has worked with Barron. Ray Young, 66, a Warrenton, Va., retiree who lost the upper part of his right ring finger in a table-saw accident, seconds that. The new finger Barron made for him looks so real, Young says, that "I've had people see it and say, 'I thought you lost a finger.' It kind of surprises them when I take it off."

For Barron, who fashions his prostheses in a lab in his three-story Ashburn, Va., home, making flawed



"Disguise lets an individual be ignored," says Barron (undercover in Czechoslovakia in '90). His prosthetics do, too.

bodies whole is a labor of love. "People can be vicious towards individuals with defects," he says. "If I can correct a disfigurement, I know I've improved a life."

Even as a child, Barron displayed a knack for making art that mirrored life. When he wasn't helping his father, Phil (now deceased), and mother, Bette, 83, at their Du Quoin, Ill., clothing store, Barron, the oldest of three children, liked painting photo-realistic landscapes and drawing portraits. "My original goal was to work for Hallmark cards," he says.

Instead, after graduating from Southern Illinois University in 1962 with a degree in commercial art, he joined the Marine Corps. After four years in the service, he left and began working as an illustrator and art director for two Navy magazines. But there was a problem—his military-issued parking space was a mile from his Arlington, Va., office. So Barron took a fateful step.

## ● helping hands

He took a pass from an officer's car parked in a closer lot and forged a copy for himself. He got caught and was fined \$50, but the judge on the case was impressed with his ingenuity. "Afterwards he whispered to me, 'Damn good job. Now I know where I can get a parking permit,'" Barron says.

Barron thinks the judge may also have told the CIA about him. Just two weeks later a man saying he was from a government agency called and told Barron he wanted to speak to him about his artistic skills. Within a few months Barron was traveling the world, making forgeries of everything from passports to pocket litter (movie-ticket stubs, gas receipts) for the CIA. In 1975 he switched to disguises, training briefly with special-effects expert John Chambers, who made the ape suits for the 1968 version of *Planet of the Apes*. Barron's disguises "kept agents alive in the murky world of the intelligence trade," says retired CIA deputy director Herb Saunders. "He was an artist first and an intelligence officer second."

Ultimately, neither role was fulfilling enough. Intrigued by anatomy and medical illustration, he began studying both part-time at the University of Michigan. A meeting of the Association of Biomedical Sculptors he attended in the early '90s inspired him to form his own company, Custom Prosthetic Designs, Inc. After retiring from the CIA in 1993, he focused all his energies on his new craft.

To date, Barron—a twice-divorced father of two



**Brittany Hoyle**  
With the new ear that Barron made for her, says Hoyle (with Barron at his home in June), "I feel unique."



sons, Mark, 31, and Todd, 17—has made prostheses for hundreds of clients, at prices ranging from \$3,000 to \$7,000 for an ear or a nose and up to several times that for a complete face. Many insurance companies will at least partially reimburse patients for his work. "When plastic surgery is ineffective or a patient is unwilling to go through reconstructive surgery," he says, "this is their last hope."

Some jobs are relatively simple—a new eye for Pauline Milliner, 75, a retired Virginia Beach travel agent who lost hers to cancer in 1980, or an ear for 8-year-old Brittany Hoyle of Herndon, Va., who was born with only a lobe. Others, such as the new eyes, ears and nose Barron helped create for a Pakistani woman whose jealous husband mutilated her, are astonishingly complex and require collaboration with plastic surgeons. His patients are always profoundly grateful. "Dear Mr. Barron," Angela Aretz wrote him, "Thank you for making my ear. It makes me very happy." Barron knows the feeling. "It's the most heart-warming thing imaginable to see a little girl smile a genuine smile," he says. "That's when I know I've done my job."

- Kim Hubbard
- J. Todd Foster in Ashburn



For more on Custom Prosthetic Designs, go to [www.people.com](http://www.people.com) or AOL (Keyword: People)