

Local News

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Tami Stepankowski uses a paintbrush to color an artificial eyeball.

Eye clinic sets its sights on perfect match

By DICK CHRISTIAN
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When a frightened 6-year-old boy recently visited the small clinic on South Park Avenue in Hamburg, he had no idea that he was to be the beneficiary of the accomplishments of a woman who suffered from a similar need at a similar age.

He only knew that his mom and dad said he was going to get a new eye.

He was born with glaucoma in his left eye, and numerous operations failed to restore his sight. He was fitted at the clinic with an ocular prosthesis, or artificial eye. When the process is over, it virtually will be impossible to tell one eye from the other.

The work is being done by Tami Stepankowski and her staff at the Ocular Restoration Clinic.

At 31, she is one of only 100 or so board certified ocularists in the United States.

She never specifically decided to specialize in creating custom-made, plastic artificial eyeballs, which are so perfectly crafted in size, shape and color that they defy detection.

"It just happened," she said. "I remember when I was very young meeting a lady named LaDonna Swan. She was a close friend of my grandparents, and we'd often visit her home in Eden.

"She was playing with friends at a neighborhood playground," recalled Mrs. Stepankowski, "and caught a speck of dust in her eye. She rubbed the eye all day and created a streptococcal infection — something that antibiotics today might have cured. It developed into an ulcer and a cataract that covered her eye with a white film."

For 10 years, she said, Miss Swan suffered the emotional pain of her deformity.

Eventually, she had the eye socket cleaned out and a glass eye installed.

"She became almost obsessed with finding a prosthesis that was safe, attractive and as close to the real thing as possible," Mrs. Stepankowski said.

By 1960, Miss Swan sold the photography business that her father had operated and opened her first laboratory-clinic in the old Lafayette Building, later moving the practice to Hamburg.

"I remember the first time I visited her clinic and saw the craftsmanship of the artificial eyes she was producing," Mrs. Stepankowski said. "I almost lost my breath. They were beautiful. I felt drawn to what she was doing. I was always artistic as a child, and, at the same time, I wanted to do something special for people."

By the time she was 15, she was working in Miss Swan's clinic as an assistant. By the time she was 25, she was a board-certified ocularist. In 1989, Miss Swan sold Mrs. Stepankowski the clinic and retired to Arizona.

Carrying on a 40-year tradition, the clinic continues to see patients from around the world.

"At any age, it's the same thing for the patient," Mrs. Stepankowski said. "Teen-agers are so depressed because they feel they are deformed and ugly, and adults are apprehensive and wonder if it's all worth it. But when the process is done and they see how they look, they are suddenly given their self-confidence back. You can see the strength and determination flow back into them. You know they're going to make it."