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Working at Hamburg's Ocular Restoration Clinic are, from left: Angela Dispenza; her mother, Annmarie Dispenza, and LaDonna Swan and Tami Stepankowski.

Firm's Work Goes Unnoticed — And That's the Way They Like It

By FRANK BAKER

Probably the nicest compliment anyone could give LaDonna Swan and her patients is:

"Gee, I didn't know."

In fact, her company's motto is "Excellence that goes unnoticed." An unusual corporate slogan, but then, Ms. Swan's business is unusual.

She is the owner and founder of the Ocular Restoration Clinic, located at 5895 South Park Ave. in Hamburg, a manufacturer and fitter of ocular prostheses. Which, in laymen's terms, are artificial eyes.

Ms. Swan is a board certified ocularist, which means she has had either a five-year apprenticeship with a certified ocularist or has 10,000 hours of experience in the field, and has passed a rigorous test. There are only about 100 board certified ocularists in the entire country, she said.

"There aren't that many people who need our services, so ocularists are very specialized," said Ms. Swan.

While there may not be an overwhelming number of people clamoring for her services, those who do come to Ms. Swan's clinic leave with a new sense of dignity, pride and attractiveness.

"No one wants to look freakish," she said. "I used to and know what it's like."

Ms. Swan, who has a barely detectable artificial eye which she

made herself, noted that most patients are very depressed about their appearance before receiving an ocular prosthesis.

"The younger children especially have a change in their outlook and confidence," once they receive a new eye, she said.

But, not just youngsters. One of Ms. Swan's favorite cases involved a 68-year-old woman who had lived her entire life with a deformed eye.

"She never knew something could be done about it," remembered Ms. Swan. "She was so happy when she left. We all cried and hugged each other. We have a lot of 'hugging parties' here."

Ms. Swan has also treated a 90-year-old, a five-day-old baby, and patients from as far away as India and Guatemala.

A self-confessed graduate of the school of hard knocks, Ms. Swan began her training in artificial eye making during the 1940's.

"I wanted to start a year-round clinic," recalled Ms. Swan. "I remember when I was young, service for glass eyes was not good. The manufacturer of the eye would only come around once or twice a year. Many times the eye didn't fit correctly, which made it very uncomfortable."

Today, with the advent of acrylic material rather than glass for artificial eyes, Ms. Swan's clinic can make a snugger fitting, more comfortable prostheses.

"I dreamed about having a clinic that could provide the services we do," she said.

Those services include everything from counseling — losing an eye is like losing any other part of the body and is very traumatic, said Ms. Swan — to capping an existing eye so it won't have to be removed and will look normal, to making an actual replacement eye for the patient.

On the occasions when a replacement eye is needed, Ms. Swan or a member of her staff will consult with the patient's physician and work out a kind of blueprint for the type of eye which will be most comfortable and attractive.

Once the specifications for the eye are noted, one of the clinicians will meet with the patient and begin development of the eye.

The first step is to hand paint the pigment which will comprise the iris. Then, a mold is taken of the patient's socket and the prostheses itself is made. The two are then combined and simulated fibrous veins, limbus blend and final coloration are added. Finally, the entire eye is covered with a plastic coating and is polished smooth.

The process takes three to four weeks and the resulting eye is practically indistinguishable from a real one.

"You really can't tell the difference," noted Ms. Swan.