

Man creates custom-made artificial eyes

■ After serving as his father's apprentice, Robert Henderlite sets up shop in Charlotte.

Robert Henderlite stood a few feet away from his first patient as she appraised his work. Henderlite, owner of Southeastern Ocularists Inc., had just custom-made an artificial eye for her, and was anxiously waiting for a reaction.

Her silence did not give him a good feeling.

"She looked like, 'Oh, my gosh.' She started crying. I said, 'How do you like it?' and she took a step toward me. I kinda stepped back. I thought she was going to hit me! But she hugged me and said, 'Thank you, thank you.'"

Henderlite said the eye gave her a new sense of confidence. She began talking about all the things she was going to do. She told him it made her feel like a new person.

That's the reason Henderlite, 29, decided to pursue the intricate craft a few years ago.

"It's such a traumatizing thing for someone to lose an eye to an accident or a tumor," Henderlite said. "When they walk into my office, they have no idea what to expect. When they leave, there's such a difference."

Growing up, Henderlite never considered going into the field that his uncle and his father, ophthalmologist Hunter Henderlite, have been in for about 50 and 15 years, respectively.

But after working in sales for five years, the Penn State graduate came to Charleston, S.C., in 1992 to assist his father and to take a career break. Working as an apprentice to his father, he saw how pleased people were with their new eyes. He gradually became more interested in the field as a long-term career.

Apprenticeships are a common way of learning about the craft since there is no formal classroom education required to become an ophthalmologist, according to the Oregon-based American Society of Ophthalmologists.

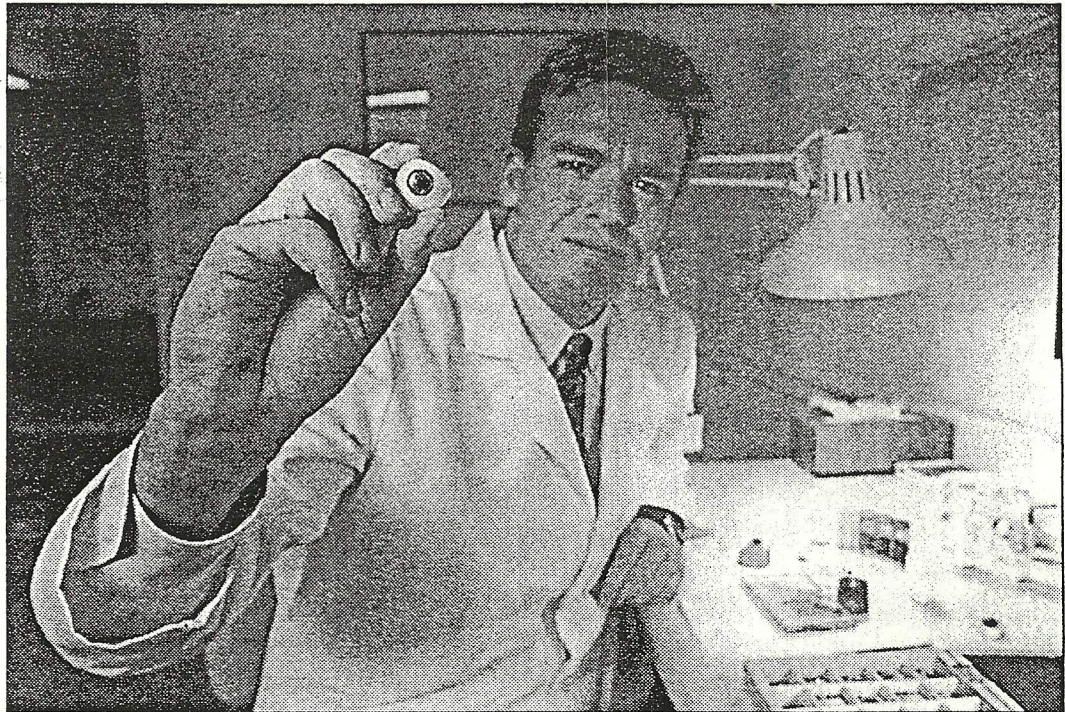
Nearly two years ago, Henderlite started seeing patients on his own.

Some companies mass-produce eyes, Henderlite said. Many of his competitors are traveling ophthalmologists who come into town for appointments every few months.

Henderlite attempts to match the artificial eye as close as possible to the real thing. His artificial eyes cost about \$1,600.

Working with plastic, bonding liquids, paint and thread, it usually takes Henderlite most of the day to create a customized eye.

He uses fine threads of soft crimson silk to recreate the red veins that cast a web on the cornea; applying the threads is a 40-minute process. The pupil is created with at least 20 coats of paint, stroke after painstaking stroke, taking another 40 minutes to complete.



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Robert Henderlite

Age: 29

Name of company: Southeastern Ocularists Inc.

Address: 4126 Park Rd., Suite B, Charlotte.

Description: Makes and fits people with artificial eyes.

How long in business: 2 years.

Employees: None.

Patients: About 150.

Resume: Graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts; sales representative for Telecom Specialists, a small telephone company in Silver Spring, Md., 1987-90; AT&T sales representative in Wilmington, Del., 1990-92; apprentice to father, an ophthalmologist in Charleston, 1992.

Initial investment: About \$10,000.

Advice: "Improve your service. With a little extra work, you can make things a lot better."

Making a profit? Yes.

What he likes most about running his own business: "There's a lot of responsibility. I end up staying late. I'm usually (at the office) on weekends. I love it."

That's because sometimes, eye doctors have never heard of the term ophthalmologist, though they are familiar with the craft. And a lot of doctors don't have time for his pitch.

"Sometimes, I feel like I'm sending letters out into the wind. I'm sure the doctors don't open all their mail," he said.

But Henderlite's marketing efforts have worked. Eye doctors have referred about 150 patients to him. Of course, he learned quickly that not all patients express their gratitude the way his first one did.

"With the next patient, I stood behind him waiting for this big hug," he said. "The guy said 'Thank you' and left."

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Throughout the procedure, Henderlite compares the artificial eye to the patient's existing eye.

Even the imperfections of the human eye — scar tissue, ridges —

are replicated on the 18-millimeter plastic orb by making an impression of the patient's eye socket.

The hardest part of starting his business was getting customers.