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Prostheses help to give amputees social confidence

Osaka's Kobo Arte counts ex-yakuza, accident victims, kids with birth defects among clientele

By MOTONOBU ENDO

OSAKA (Kyodo) Eight years ago, a gangster sought out Yunosuke Narumi for advice about leaving his crime syndicate and becoming a normal member of society.

"I can't stand life in the gang anymore," he told Narumi, who works for the Osaka Prefectural Police providing advice to yakuza who want out.

However, the gangster's left pinkie had been chopped off. Yakuza are required to cut off their own fingers to settle vendettas or as a price for making a mistake.

The 62-year-old Narumi told the man, "If you want to have a false finger made, I know a good prosthetic limb maker."

Many yakuza also have elaborate tattoos on their backs and upper arms, but those can be covered up by clothing. Missing fingers are difficult to conceal, however, and pose an impediment for gangsters who hope to fit in with society.

The man chose to have an artificial finger made by Kobo Arte in Osaka and found work at a construction firm.

Narumi heard nothing from the man for years, until last winter. He got a call from the man, who said, "I've become the president of a company." The former yakuza had started his own business in Osaka.

"His successful social integration might be attributed to the



An employee applies fine details to prosthetic fingers at Kobo Arte in Kita Ward, Osaka. KYODO PHOTO

prosthetic finger. I'm truly glad to see him hanging tough," Narumi said.

Narumi has introduced about 15 former yakuza to the prosthesis workshop, which has "restored" hundreds of fingers since it was launched in 1992.

The workshop is now a division of Kawamura Gishi Co. in Daito, Osaka Prefecture, and receives orders from across the nation, including from non-Japanese.

Shiro Enomoto, 31, one of five prosthetic artists at the workshop, is confident their products look real. Everything from skin color to nail forms to fine wrinkles are based on special makeup technologies from the movie industry.

"We're able to reproduce any part of the body and every kind of skin color for all ages, from babies to the elderly," Enomoto said.

Among about 2,000 users of Arte's products are a woman who lost her breasts due to cancer, a woman whose ring finger was cut off in an accident and a baby born without ears.

Kazuyuki Shibamoto, a 38-year-old operator of a printing company in Chuo Ward, Tokyo, visited the Arte workshop in February 2006 after his hand was mangled in an accident that included the loss of two fingers.

He initially refused to accept recommendations from his doctor to have the entire hand amputated.

"Having my hand and how it looks is important to me," he told the doctor. But Shibamoto changed his mind and decided to go ahead with the surgery after he saw samples of prosthetic hands at the Osaka workshop.

"I felt like I was reborn. My decision was for the better," he said.

His artificial left hand is highly realistic, with artificial but lifelike nails, fingerprints, wrinkles and blood vessels.

Shibamoto is able to hold a cigarette between his fingers and can drive a car with an automatic transmission. If he passes an examination and receives a certificate, he will also be able

to drive a manual-shift vehicle.

"I hope to increase my business range by getting a license for heavy vehicles," he said.

The workshop goes through a complex process when making prosthetic devices. The original body part is reproduced by infusing plaster into a pattern. The tentative figure is fine-tuned based on the customer's opinions about shape and sense of comfort. Silicon is then injected into the plaster cast.

"The colors or forms are changed according to the user's job and age," Enomoto said.

It takes a month and a half to produce a prosthetic finger and about three months for other parts of the body. A finger costs more than ¥150,000 and the expense is not covered by public health insurance. However, the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry offers various forms of financial support to people who need artificial legs or hands.

A 52-year-old woman who did not want to be identified by name expressed delight with her newly made finger.

"It's splendid! I want everybody to see my finger as soon as possible," she said.

A year ago her left index finger had to be amputated following a medical error in which a hypodermic needle was inserted into an artery.

"I'll buy a new ring (to wear on the finger) as a reward," she said. Virtually nobody can tell the finger is artificial. She feels no hesitation to wave her left hand in front of other people. She also paints her nails.

After the amputation, the woman had not wanted to visit her hometown to see her parents. Things are different now.

"I'm thinking about returning after this long interval," she said, adding she wants to attend a school reunion.

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