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'A hero among us'

Local company did not have to look far for the subject of a documentary on people with missing limbs to be shown on Discovery Channel. Marty Ravellette, an armless landscaper, can do with his legs almost everything most people do with their arms.

By Dave Hart
Staff Writer

Bill Hayes was in his office on Henderson Street, keeping things battened down while Hurricane Isabel tossed the treetops outside, when he heard over the storm the growl of a chainsaw cranking up somewhere outside.

"It can't be, Hayes thought. Surely that's not who I think it is."
"I went outside to take a look," he said. "A tree had fallen across the road up the street. And, sure enough, who's up there cutting these giant limbs apart and hauling them out of the way? It's Marty. I just stood there and thought, what kind of scene is this? Here we are in the middle of a hurricane, and here's this armless guy out there in the wind and rain cutting up downed trees. He had come to check up on me."

Marty Ravellette, a 64-year-old local landscaper, has long been a familiar sight in and around town. He has breakfast — soft-scrambled eggs, bacon, toast and coffee — almost every morning at Sutton's Drugstore, and if you happen to pass by while he's working, it's hard not to notice that the man pushing the lawnmower, planting shrubs or cutting up trees has no arms.

Sometime within the next month or two, the Discovery Channel cable television network will air a one-hour documentary about Ravellette.

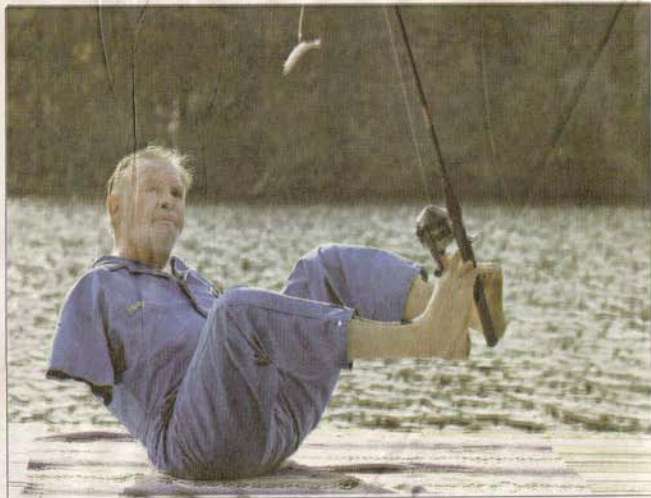
The special, "No Arms Needed: A Hero Among Us," was produced by Advanced Medical Productions, a small documentary production company Hayes and the rest of the staff run from the office adjoining his Henderson Street home.

The company has been producing medical documentaries since Hayes founded it in 1992; the show on Ravellette is its 102nd documentary, he said. Advanced Medical productions have run on Discovery, The Learning Channel, Animal Planet and other stations — one of the company's series, "The Operation," run for six seasons on TLC — and have garnered acclaim and awards for their sensitive but unblinking looks at issues such as conjoined twins, trans-sexuality, paralysis and other topics.

"A big part of what we do is tell the stories of people who are perceived as different, people who aren't well understood," Hayes said as he sat in his office in front of a big white board listing some two dozen Advanced Medical productions in various stages of progress. "I've traveled a lot, and one thing I've learned is that people are a lot more similar than they are different. But so often people focus on the differences.

"We try to help people understand more about each other, especially about those people who might have physical issues or look or sound a little different. If we do that successfully, we can chip away at those walls that keep people from understanding each other."

Advanced Medical wanted to produce a



Photos courtesy
of Ellen Oster

program about people missing limbs and had identified one potential subject, an armless Arizona resident. But Hayes and company soon realized they had the perfect subject right here in town.

"We saw an article in the paper about Marty," Hayes said. "It said he ate at Sutton's every morning, so one day I walked up there. I introduced myself and said, basically, 'This is who we are and what we do, and

you would be interested in working with us on a documentary about you?' He said, 'Sure.' I said, 'Great. I just want to make sure you know what you're getting yourself into.'" A camera crew accompanied Ravellette for about six months. They filmed him at work and going about his daily activities. They filmed him fishing with his grandchildren, playing pool with friends, talking with a journalism class at UNC. They went with

him to a family reunion, to visit his mother in California, to see other family members in Florida, to Pennsylvania to visit the Good Shepherd home for handicapped and orphaned children, where he spent most of the first 16 years of his life.

An old black-and-white film shot at Good Shepherd shows Ravellette as a baby, lying on his back in his crib, feeding himself with a bottle held between his feet.

"The orphanage made that film to show people what kind of place it was," Ravellette said. "I got to meet the nurses who had the wisdom not just to feed me themselves but to put the bottle in my feet and try to teach me to feed myself. I owe them a tremendous debt, because that was the start of everything. That was the start of learning to do things myself. It's amazing how a simple little thing like that can grow into something so great."

Ravellette was born to an Indiana farm couple in December 1939. The whole extended Ravellette family had gathered to await the birth of the child, the couple's fourth.

"No Arms Needed" includes the recollections of one of Ravellette's aunts, who recall the moment when Ernie Ravellette, Marty's father, came

into the room after the delivery. "We said, 'Is the baby here?'" Marty's



Marty Ravellette fishes on a lake in Surry County. Fishing is one of his favorite pastimes. He uses his feet to bait hooks, cast his line and remove the fish from the hook. At far left, Ravellette, a landscaper, mows a lawn while producer Bill Hayes tapes him for the show "No Arms Needed: A Hero Among Us." At bottom left, Hayes and Ravellette enjoy a cup of coffee at Sutton's Drug Store on Franklin Street. The two meet weekly at Sutton's to talk about the project and about life in general.

Hero

continued from page C1

Aunt Edna said, "He said, 'Yes. But he doesn't have any arms.' And the tears just rolled down his face."

His parents placed him in Good Shepherd when he was just 2 months old. He remained there until he reached high school age. Growing up there, he learned to use his feet as adeptly as other people use their hands. The documentary depicts him shaving, eating, brushing his teeth, signing checks, baiting a fishing hook and doing myriad other daily activities large and small — all with feet. When he sits and talks, he gestures with his feet in exactly the same way that many people gesticulate with their hands.

Jill Raker, grand-daughter of Good Shepherd founder John Raker, said in the film that the key was that nobody was treated any differently than anyone else. And soon, she said, the children didn't treat themselves as though they were different, either.

"No self-pity was allowed," she said.

Self-pity, the film makes clear, has never been a part of Ravellette's makeup. He was, he said, "a tough kid." He has never placed any limitations on himself, and he won't allow anyone else to impose any on him.

As longtime friend Ray Estes says in the documentary, heaven help the restaurant staffer or patron who has a problem with Ravellette.

"Restaurants are his specialty," Estes said in the film.



Photo courtesy of Ellen Ozler

Ravellette drives from one job to another. Marty uses his feet for many activities, including driving his own van.

"When someone sees Marty with his foot on the table and asks him to leave, they do not know what they are getting themselves into. Marty has become a soldier in the cause of those mistreated by society."

In 1998, Ravellette made international news when he rescued an elderly woman from a burning vehicle on the shoulder of U.S. 15-501 outside

Durham. He and his wife, Marie, were driving past and saw smoke pouring from a minivan, and as they passed, Ravellette spotted a flash of red coat inside.

They pulled over. Ravellette ran to the car, saw the woman inside and broke the window with his foot to let her out.

When reporters wanted to talk to him afterward, he said, he told them he wasn't inter-

ested.

"But my wife said, 'Wait a minute,'" he recalled. "Maybe there's something here that's good."

What was good, he realized, was the opportunity to share his story with a broader public, and thereby to encourage acceptance and motivation. He has begun doing more public speaking.

"I tell people about the

dynamics of positive living, about the importance of self-esteem and learning to accept people who are different," Ravellette said last week. "If you're going to talk about those things, it's best to use your own life as an example. That's what I'm doing."

"I go to Sutton's every day, and even now there will occasionally be someone who complains about my feet on the

counter. It always surprises me, and it bothers me. But it hasn't stopped me. People in wheelchairs, we accept. People on crutches, people who use seeing-eye dogs, that doesn't bother us. But armless people still face some misunderstanding. That's changing, slowly, a little bit at a time."

One scene in the film captures Ravellette talking to one of Chuck Stone's journalism classes at Carolina. As the students take notes, Ravellette writes his name on the white board and tells them, "God has given every one of us a gift. My gift is that I was born with no arms."

"What we who are handicapped can show the rest of the world is that there's still hope, there's still opportunity, there's always a chance," Ravellette said. "But you have to make the right choices. You have to stick your neck out a little bit. And you're going to get bruised a few times. But nothing will ever be accomplished if you don't get bruised a little bit."

Dave Hart can be reached at 532-8744 or dhart@nando.com