

Austin American-Statesman

statesman.com

FINAL EDITION ■ SUNDAY, DECEMBER 2, 2007 ■ \$1.60

'Hopefully, I'll be able to tie my shoes'



SEASON FOR CARING
ONE YEAR LATER:
THE OSBORNE FAMILY



Larry Kolvoord photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

By holding a rubber ball in front of a diagram, Steven Osborne helps a rehabilitation coordinator test his range of motion with his new prosthetics at Advanced Arm Dynamics in Irving. Osborne lost his arms after a 2005 accident in which he touched a power line carrying 75,000 volts of electricity.

With new prosthetic arms, man has faith he can do more

By Kevin Robbins

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

IRVING — Steven Osborne considered the past and said, "I couldn't zip up my britches."

He had trouble with knots after he lost his hands.

"I couldn't brush my teeth right."

He wanted to hold his children close but had no arms to lift them.

"I couldn't shower."

Osborne felt useless, like a boat with a hole

in the hull.

"I couldn't take the trash out," he said.

On a November afternoon in a suburb between Fort Worth and Dallas, Osborne, 36, was reborn. More than two years had passed since the accident. About a year had passed since the American-Statesman's Season for Caring campaign helped his family enjoy a Christmas he never thought possible.

The campaign, in its ninth year, helps 12 families every year and raises money for the

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Both Steven and Carla Osborne of Elgin are hoping to return to work now that Steven has upgraded his prosthetic arms and can do more for himself and the family. After his accident, Steven had to give up his job as a hauler and truck driver.

Austin American-Statesman **WORLD & NATION** Sunday, December 2, 2007

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'I'm comfortable with a hook. A lot of people aren't, just because of the way it looks. But, hey, you've got to have something that works.'

STEVEN OSBORNE



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Bridget Moses Jowid of Advanced Arm Dynamics assists Steven Osborne as he practices using his new prosthetic arm by unscrewing the top of a bottle of spices at the company's facility in Irving.

SEASON: Elgin man regaining his independence

nonprofit agencies that nominate them. Last year, readers donated \$594,000 in cash and \$191,000 in goods and services.

A year later, Osborne was getting the gift he wanted most.

New arms.

A company called Advanced Arm Dynamics contacted Osborne shortly after his family was featured in last year's Season for Caring campaign. The company's clinical director, Chris Lake, said his sister in Austin had sent him the Statesman story about the Osbornes, whose needs at the time included clothes, beds and a septic tank for their mobile home in Elgin.

The Osbornes enjoyed a Christmas that was better than they had imagined.

Families in Central Texas responded with heart, grace and charity. The Osbornes received a computer, a dining-room table, a camera, coats, pots, pans and plates. The septic system was built, and when the volunteers working on the project saw the sad shape of the old timber bridge leading to the Osbornes' property, they didn't just repair the bridge. They built a new bridge.

The Osbornes got a Ford Explorer and six tickets to "The Lion King" at Bass Concert Hall in Austin. They got new beds. They got bedding.

"This is the best Christmas we've ever had," said Osborne's wife, Carla, 37.

But one wish — for myoelectric arms to replace Steven Osborne's dated body-powered prosthetics — went unfulfilled.

That's when Advanced Arm Dynamics called.

The company offered Osborne a free consultation at its offices in Irving. The couple went earlier this year.

Osborne told Lake about May 26, 2005. He was working with his brother to move a mobile home. He touched a power line carrying 75,000 volts of electricity. The charge blew off his left hand. It burned his right one so badly that it had to be removed.

Osborne told Lake about how he couldn't work anymore as a hauler and truck driver. How he'd lost his livelihood — and his independence.

Lake and his colleagues knew they could help.

They talked with Osborne about the activities he couldn't do. He couldn't bathe. He couldn't shave. He couldn't help his 10-year-old daughter, Twyla, or 6-year-old son, Steven, get ready in the morning. He couldn't use the rest room without help.

Lake told the Osbornes that so much was possible. Myoelectric devices, Lake explained, employ electrical impulses from remaining muscles to control movement. The device is a lot like a natural arm, Lake said. If you want to rotate your wrist, tell your body to rotate your wrist. Your wrist will rotate.

"Those are exactly the muscles that did it before," Lake said.

It sounded attractive. But two new arms would cost \$140,000. The Osbornes didn't have



Myoelectric devices like Osborne's are controlled with electric impulses from remaining muscles. Medicare covered most of the expense for Osborne, and a social worker drummed up the rest.

that kind of money.

A social worker at the company explored financial options. Osborne would be eligible for Medicare in May, and that would pay for most of the expense. The social worker found other sources to cover the rest.

"With Steve, I don't think he really realized what he could obtain," Lake said.

The Osbornes returned to Irving last month.

They spent a week at Advanced Arm Dynamics. Lake and his colleagues made casts of what remained of Osborne's arms and began the work of building, testing and sizing the new appendages. Experimentation followed.

Bridget Moses Jowid, a rehabilitation coordinator with the company, performed a variety of tests on Osborne.

She situated him against a wall, and a grid measured his mobility. She asked Osborne to raise his arms. How high could he go?

Jowid put a board with holes and pegs in front of Osborne. She asked him to pluck the pegs out of the holes and put them back again. How deftly could he perform the task?

She had Osborne pick up cotton balls and rubber balls with the steel hooks at the end of the prosthetics. Could he feel the difference in firmness?

She had him locate items on a table with his eyes closed. How long would it take him to find them?

"Just because you don't have a hand like ours, you still feel," Jowid told him.

Jowid measured his pinch and grip. Osborne was stronger than he'd been since the accident. She instructed him to listen to the pitch and whine of his new arms as the pressure built between the two steel hooks. Osborne had to learn to modulate his grip.

"You've got to translate it," Jowid said.

Osborne studied the prosthetics with the wonder of a child contemplating a new mechanical toy. His old arms, which used clumsy rubber bands to open and close the hooks, seemed prehistoric to him. Osborne now possessed the agility and sensitivity to accomplish tasks that months ago seemed impossible.

"Hopefully, I'll be able to tie my shoes," he said. "I may not be able to, but I'll sure give it a shot."

The couple thumbed through a catalog of items designed for people with prosthetic arms like his. They chose a potholder, a knife, a can opener, a jar opener, a nail clipper and a button hook. Osborne scanned the pages for more. He liked the possibility of feeling useful again. Once he can do more, his family can do more.

"I can go back to work. He can go back to work. We can lead a normal life," Carla Osborne said.

Steven Osborne said he wants to get a job driving escort trucks, leading oversized loads down the interstate. With his new arms and a properly outfitted truck, Osborne believes, he can draw an income again. He can have responsibilities again. He can be counted on.

Not that long ago, Osborne felt imprisoned by his own limits. He felt trapped and contained and sentenced to a future of numbing inability.

He felt less than a man.

His new arms meant a new identity. He didn't care if he had hooks instead of hands.

"I'm comfortable with a hook. A lot of people aren't, just because of the way it looks. But, hey, you've got to have something that works.

"I just want something that works," he said.

Now, Steven Osborne's body works.

"I've been waiting 2½ years for this."

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At Advanced Arm Dynamics, specialist Robert Dodson tests Steven Osborne's arm. By learning to adjust the pressure between hooks and translating impulse to motion, Osborne should be able to use the hook much like a hand. The hooks in his old prosthetics used rubber bands to open and close.

