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Northland mom of five gets new arm after old one stolen

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Gaby Carmona wiped tears from her eyes after learning she is receiving a new prosthetic arm to replace the one that was stolen from her van in September. Julian Wells, clinical manager at Advanced Arm Dynamics in Overland Park, explained to her how the prosthetic community had heard her story and came together to help. Shane Keyser

First, the bottom lip quivered. Then came the tears.

No problem.

Katie, 7, grabbed a tissue, reached up and dried her mom's cheek. Gaby Carmona managed to smile and cry at the same time.

Tuesday was a happy day for this family.

"I will never forget this day," Carmona, 29, said. "I will never forget what people did for me. My heart is pounding."

Last September, someone broke into Carmona's minivan and stole her myoelectric prosthetic arm. It cost too much to

replace — \$120,000 — so the Northland wife and mother of five went without. Not an easy thing — getting kids ready for schools, tying shoes, fixing meals, working four part-time jobs.

On Tuesday, Carmona arrived at Advanced Arm Dynamics in Overland Park for assessment for a new passive prosthetic hand, one pretty much just for balance and show. No muscle control of fingers.

But Julian Wells, clinical manager at the lab, had a surprise. He told her that he had "sent out the bat signal" and that the prosthetic community was touched by her story of raising five children, working 16-hour days and trying to raise money for a replacement hand.



Gaby Carmona of Kansas City hugged Julian Wells, clinical manager at Advanced Arm Dynamics in Overland Park, after learning that she is getting a new prosthetic arm. *Shane Keyser*

“So we are going to do a whole lot better than just a passive hand,” he told her.

A company called SteeperUSA, which made the hand that was stolen, donated its very latest “bebionic” design for her. Wells’ company, Advanced Arm Dynamics, would provide time, fitting and training for the new prosthetic.

And then there was a local family who donated a myoelectric arm from a loved one who had died. Electrodes from that arm will be used for Carmona’s new one. Also, the older arm will serve as a backup for Carmona.

Wells told Carmona the family had seen her story.

“I will be grateful to them forever,” Carmona said of the family.

On a day of hugs and tears, Wells said: “Today is why I do what I do.”

Israel, 12, the oldest of Carmona’s five children, later said he was so glad to see his mother happy.

“That bad day when this happened, she cried all the time,” he said.

His sister Beatriz, 11, knew how important the day and kindness were for her mother.

“Since back then, I’ve helped with the little ones, and I was happy to do that,” she said. “But I know it was hard on her to not be able to do some things. It made her sad, and I didn’t like seeing that.”

Carmona was born without a left arm because of a congenital trait. She got her first prosthetic limb when she was 8 and used it until last year when she got a myoelectric arm, which allowed her own muscles to control the artificial hand.

She was able to get the high-tech limb because at the time she had health insurance through a full-time job that no longer exists.

Carmona’s husband, Jesus Javier Ramirez, does remodeling work. The children are ages 4, 7, 9, 11 and 12. The whole bunch shows up every Sunday at Grandview Park Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Kan., where the Rev. Rick Behrens said they help out any time the church has a need.

Carmona works at a domestic violence shelter and does after-school care. She also sometimes serves as a courtroom translator for Spanish-speaking defendants, and in 2013, she faced down a group of neo-Nazis holding a rally in downtown Kansas City.

According to a Kansas City police report, Carmona called police about 6:50 a.m. Sept. 20 and told them she had left her arm in the minivan the night before because she was tired after a long day.

She told officers that as soon as she realized the arm was not in her home, she ran outside of her house in the 4400 block of North Indiana Avenue and found the sliding door open on her minivan and the arm gone.

She knew it was gone for good.

“I didn’t want to live being mad, so I chose to get back up and keep moving,” she said Tuesday. “I saw the worst of people. But now I’ve seen the best, too.

“Now I want to ride a bike again.”