

Natalie Mecklenburg

Ms. Smith

Internship 4B

7 February 2025

Zach Hughes Transcript

Natalie Mecklenburg: What is your current job title?

Zach Hughes: Prosthetist - (Nationally Certified by the American Board of Certification (in Orthotics and Prosthetics), and Licensed by the Georgia Composite Medical Board to practice in the State of Georgia.). Additionally, I am the sole owner of my company, which is an LLC.

N: What is your favorite aspect of your career?

Z: Problem-solving and fixing issues that amputees have encountered from previous poor experiences with either a former prosthesis or a former prosthetist. I enjoy fixing things at all levels, and coming up with unique solutions.

N: What is your least favorite aspect of your career?

Z: Fighting insurance companies for reasonable payments related to claims filed on behalf of my patients. Add to that the extensive documentation required for this process, which is above and beyond most medical professions, because we cannot use templates or checklists. Writing multi-paragraph narratives in addition to the patient care that I do is pretty exhausting.

N: What degree did you pursue in college and what college did you attend? What further education, if any, do you have?

Z: I have a Bachelors of Science degree in Business Management from the Scheller College of Business at Georgia Tech, and a post-graduate certificate in Prosthetics from the Prosthetics and Orthotics Center at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine (Chicago, IL)

N: What first got you interested in this career field?

Z: My father is a now retired prosthetist, and he worked at the Children's Hospital in Atlanta for a bit of his career, so I was enamored with his ability to help kids walk and/or use artificial arms to complete complex tasks - allowing those kids to live fairly normal lives despite being born with, or acquiring early through disease or trauma, a substantial disability.

N: How has the prosthetic industry changed since you first started working in it? How do you stay updated with all these advancements?

Z: Two things really come to mind. First is the advanced educational degree and certification requirement. I did my post-graduate work in 2011. For new students starting in 2013, the program moved to a Masters Degree. This standardized the level of education for new practitioners, but also increased the barrier to entry. Going from a post-grad certificate to a Masters Degree increased the cost of education (i.e. the student loan debt required to enter the field) from about \$10,000 to over \$60,000). This has been, in my opinion, a net negative. Wages for our field have mostly stagnated over the past decade, but now it costs 5-6x to enter. The economics of this situation have turned a lot of promising people away from this field into better paying fields like PT/OT or medical sales. Additionally, all new students as of 2025 have to be dual-certified. That means you are required to obtain certification in Orthotics and Prosthetics. I do not view this positively, even though there is a large overlap between the fields, each one

requires a unique skill set and, more importantly, passion for the job at hand. It is also even more expensive for the prospective student to do this than what I described above. Secondly, there was a lot more emphasis on "hand skills" when I entered the field. Prosthetists needed to be able to use fabrication shop equipment proficiently. Things like sanders, bandsaws, processing resins and composites. All of those things have vanished, as those tasks are now outsourced to (important) blue-collar workers called technicians. The new emphasis is on the ability to document treatment well and to get paid - whether that's for your own company or for a corporation you may work for. A positive note is that this has made our workforce a bit more diverse, demographically speaking, as people who were disinclined to do some of the dirty work can now enter a little more professional environment.

N: What's the biggest piece of advice you would give to someone interested in a career in prosthetics?

Z: The biggest piece of advice that I have is to shadow as much as possible in a clinic before making a decision to obtain education to enter the field. In media coverage, we often see people with prosthetics as young, fit, and overcoming obstacles with a cool almost futuristic limb replacement. The reality, which can only be experienced through shadowing, is that most amputees are old and sick - often with vascular disease brought on by diabetes, smoking, or other lifelong poor nutritional decisions. Finding out that you don't necessarily enjoy working with this population upfront can save you years of unneeded school and associated debt. If you shadow in a clinic, and think it's cooler to work with your hands -- doing things like heating and vacuum-forming plastic to make braces, or using resin and carbon fiber to make prosthetic sockets -- you can choose to become a prosthetic/orthotic technician, which is a much-needed

career with a much lower barrier to entry than becoming a prosthetist/orthotist. Finally, make sure you have a passion for this! The hours are often long, and the pay is honestly not great outside of entrepreneurship or executive positions within corporations. Many other health careers with similar lengths of schooling - PT/OT, RNs, even Dentists - pay moderately to much better than this field. However, if you have a passion for this after getting some experience, your ability to change people's lives for the better in this field is unmatched. When you restore mobility to someone at their time of need, they are your patient, and often your friend, for life. That's something you really can't get anywhere else in healthcare.