

Mask Painting 101

BY ASRT STAFF

A therapist shares her process of painting her patients' radiation therapy masks.

RACHAELE "RACEE" TAYLOR, R.T.(T), spends most of her lunch breaks with several other therapists at the Maryland Proton Treatment Center in Baltimore painting custom radiation therapy masks for their patients. Racee had planned to be an art teacher before she began her now 15-year career in radiation therapy.

"We fill every patient's paint request," she said, "from picturesque landscapes to a hodgepodge of special images." What results is a very personalized mask for each patient to wear during the course of his or her treatment.

Racee offers the following tips for anyone looking to paint patient masks:

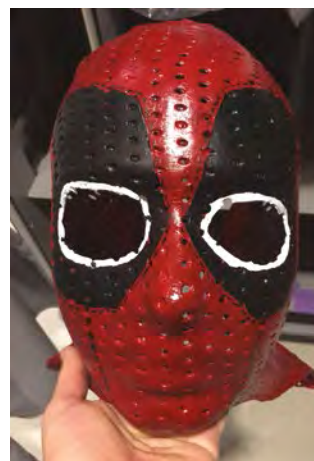
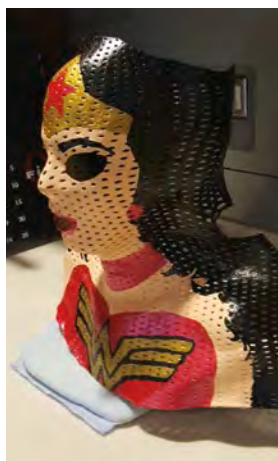
- 1. Wear gloves.** It gets messy.
- 2. Use acrylic paints.** Racee likes to use enamel acrylic because it has a nice shine and adheres to the masks. Standard acrylic paint is flat and chalky, so it tends to scrape off the masks; however, adding a gloss mixture and sealer will help give cheaper acrylics an enamel quality. Explore the options at your art supply store.
- 3. Build up a good surface.** Paint a base color over the entire mask, which will provide a good surface for the painted design. Also, because the paintbrushes used to paint the initial

coat tend to fray, designate a few frayed brushes just for this step so you don't ruin all your brushes. This first coat is the most time-consuming step. However, it doesn't require artistic ability, making it a good job for those who want to help but say they're not artistic.

- 4. Take your time.** After the base color has dried, you can begin painting the patient's requested design. You'll need to build up several layers of color to create a good effect, so leave plenty of time for the mask to dry between painting sessions and before the patient's scheduled treatment. Racee said a few patients have left her facility with a little extra color on their skin.
- 5. Watch for drips.** Paint will drip through the holes and go inside the mask. When this happens, use your brush to spread out the drips; the inside doesn't need to be pretty. However,



Rachaele Taylor and her co-workers buy supplies and spend their lunch breaks painting custom masks for their patients.



be sure not to let beads of paint dry on the inside; that texture will come in contact with the patient's face and be uncomfortable.

6. **Respect your facility.** Painting masks is something Racee and other therapists volunteered to do, so they don't do it during work hours or in the treatment room. They paint at lunchtime using a designated room where they keep their art supplies. The facility provides some of the paint and brushes, and staff members bring in their own supplies as well.
7. **You don't have to be an artist.** Painting masks is fun and rewarding. "All our patients love the effort we put into it," Racee said.
8. **Take pictures.** Racee keeps a photo album for patients to view and get ideas for their masks.

Racee said she loves painting masks for her patients. "It brings us closer to our patients and their families," she said. "If painting masks could be my job for the rest of my life, I would do it in a heartbeat!"[©]