

Striving for better pictures

By Megan Anderson

Debbie Anderson says she does her part to help women detect breast cancer. Her work, done inside a room marked with "Caution: Radiation" signs, requires her to pay attention to details and quality control.

Three days a week, Debbie Anderson can be found inside a room marked with the warning "Caution: Radiation." In here, the air smells faintly of chemicals, and large pieces of X-ray equipment dominate the room.

The hallways leading here are painted a warm golden-yellow, and earth-toned floral pictures on the walls add a welcoming touch. Green plants add a bright splash of color along the halls, and soft chairs sit against the wall. If not for the waiting and reception areas, the space would be more reminiscent of a Holiday Inn than the doctor's office it is.

At 5 p.m. on a Wednesday, the workday is almost over, and Anderson is ready to go home.

"I'm domestic-minded," she says as she straightens up the counter in front of her. "I like being home just as much as I like being at work."

But since the Mexican vacations Anderson and her husband enjoy won't pay for themselves, she works part-time. On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays,

Anderson works as a radiological technologist at Humility of Mary Partners for Women's Health in Austintown.

Anderson enjoys working part-time in this office, which provides complete women's health care. She takes pride in her job of doing mammograms, which are X-rays of a woman's breast to screen for breast cancer and other abnormalities

"I feel like I'm contributing to an important cause, since breast cancer can be cured if found in time," she says.

But breast cancer can't be detected if the X-ray machines aren't functioning properly. That's why the first thing Anderson does each morning is check the machines to make sure they're working correctly.

"There's a lot of quality control to mammography," she says.

She holds up what looks like a foot-long piece of spinal cord enclosed in a plastic rectangle, and explains that it's called a phantom. It has the same density as real

bone, and she uses it every morning to test the machine called a Dexascan, which tests patients for osteoporosis by taking a low-dose X-ray of the hip and spine. Every morning, she also prints out a patient schedule. By the time the patients arrive, she has their old X-rays ready, so she can use them to adjust the machine for their new mammograms.

“Every patient is different,” she says. “It’s like taking a photograph and making technical adjustments.”

“I’m good at it,” she continues. “Every time I put a film up, I try to beat it. I always try to get a better picture.”

Debbie Sinn, a long-time co-worker of Anderson's, agrees that Anderson is an asset to the office.

“She’s probably one of my favorite people to work with,” Sinn says. “She’s very easygoing, and she never seems to be in a bad mood. She’s fun; we all get along.” Anderson tries to use her easygoing nature to put her patients at ease during their mammograms. She knows that the procedure can be uncomfortable and embarrassing, and she does her best to talk to and joke with her patients to make them feel comfortable.

“Some people wouldn’t want to get that close to people,” she says, “but I’ve been doing it for so long it doesn’t bother me.”

When doing a mammogram, Anderson takes four films of the breast, using a Lorad mammography machine. Taking four films ensures that the breast tissue can be viewed from different angles, and makes it easier to see cancer or other trouble spots.

Although she likes her job and does well at it, Anderson didn't always aspire to take X-rays of breasts. She originally wanted to be a teacher, but didn't want to go to a four-year college. Instead, she chose to go to the Southside School of Radiological Technology for a two-year program.

“I always liked the idea of medicine,” she says. “But I don't have the patience for nursing.” So she chose the next best thing for her.

Anderson worked at Northside Hospital in Youngstown for about six years, doing diagnostic X-rays, but it wasn't work she enjoyed.

“There was too much physical work,” she says, “a lot of lifting and pulling.” She also didn't like the long hours and changing shifts at the hospital.

“This is the best job I could have gotten,” she says of her job now. “It's nice working part-time. I have the best of both worlds; I work for three days, and I'm home for four.”

Although Anderson feels that her job is very important, it's also important to her to be home, and take care of her household. On her days off, Anderson keeps up with her housework, and she also enjoys spending time on her computer, experimenting with photo-editing software. She also likes to bake; the air in her home is often filled with the scent of baking cookies or cakes.

Another pastime that Anderson looks forward to each week is her Friday night dinner date with her husband of 26 years, Tim, a man she calls her soul mate and best friend.

"Fridays used to be our date night when our kids were little," she explains. "We'd go to the grocery store, and then out to eat while Grandma babysat the kids." Now that her two children are grown, Anderson doesn't have to worry about a babysitter on Friday nights. She and her husband are free to go out at their leisure, and they take advantage of that by taking an annual vacation to Mexico.

"It's nice to have the extra money from my job," Anderson says; radiological technicians make an average of between \$15 and \$20 an hour.

"I started working part-time when my kids were young, so I could be home with them more, and I just never stopped," she says. Though she would make more working in a hospital, Anderson is happy with her life and job just the way they are.