

LOOKING LIKE HERSELF AGAIN

Airbrush makeup helps burn survivor recover her own style

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Maxine Richardson doesn't remember exactly how she got this way.

There are scars on her face and numbness in her feet. Pinkish skin mingles with brown over her arms and legs, the result of skin grafts she's only heard about.

It's been like this for nearly nine years, since the day a fire at the local factory where she worked consumed more than 75 percent of her body. A flammable chemical there ignited after it spilled from a bucket.

Mrs. Richardson doesn't remember much about it, but the incredible scars don't let her forget.

Neither do the stares.

"Sometimes when you go out you get this second look from people, and you know that's where it's from," the North Toledo woman said. "I used to wear shorts and T-shirts. I never wear them anymore. I don't even own a pair of shorts anymore."

Now she's been offered a chance to make it all disappear, at least temporarily.

The same makeup techniques that allow actors to look great, even under the scrutiny of high-definition television, are being used to help severe burn victims like Mrs. Richardson return to the shades of their former selves.

The Regional Burn Care Center at St. Vincent Mercy Medical Center, where Mrs. Richardson stayed for six months after the accident at the former Solar Conversion Corp. in Holland, recently gave the 52-year-old woman a free airbrush machine and training to blend her scars and cover up the light patches of new skin sprinkled over her dark-skinned body.

MULTIMEDIA

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Funding came from the St. Vincent Foundation Burn Fund. The idea is to help combat the self-image issues that can come with being a severe burn victim, said Kim Burkholder, clinical nurse manager at the burn center.

"All they show on TV are pretty people, and then you wake up every day and look in the mirror and you're not one of the pretty people, even though you're one of the most beautiful people in the world," she said. "This makes them feel like they fit in better to society."

For Mrs. Richardson, now a stay-at-home mom, the prospect of airbrushing away her patchwork skin meant more: A chance to stop hiding under long sleeves and wear summer clothes again.

"There are so many tops, blouses, and shorts and capris that I've seen everybody wearing. Maybe I'll be able to go purchase them and put them on," she said. "It won't be so hot during the summertime."

It was with this sense of excitement that she stepped back into the burn unit, where Nancy Ogden West, a specialist in clinical cosmetics from the Cleveland area, gave her a quick lesson in airbrush makeup.



Maxine Richardson and nurses admire the effects of the makeup on the right leg that was airbrushed. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

The small machine hummed along as Ms. West used the airbrush gun to spray out a fine mist of water and makeup until Mrs. Richardson's facial scars were barely visible. Next came the arms. Then the lower legs.

The change was staggering.

"You're making me a black girl again," Mrs. Richardson said.

She rolled up her pants to simulate capri pants and admired herself in a full-length mirror. The pinkish skin grafts — cells from Mrs. Richardson that were grown in a petri dish and didn't keep her original pigment — were gone.

The trick, Ms. West said, is not to expect an exact match between the original and reconstructed skin. Even with the makeup, there were some small differences evident between them.

"You're not going for perfect. This is the body. The body has multiple colors in it," she said.

Soon it was Mrs. Richardson's turn to try for herself.

As the lesson neared its end, there was a moment of quiet when Mrs. Richardson just looked at herself in the mirror as workers from the burn unit watched.

"What do you think when you look in that mirror?" someone asked.

Mrs. Richardson's answer was serious and full of satisfaction.

"This is the color it's supposed to be."

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Wearing her new makeup, Mrs. Richardson confidently goes shopping at Westfield Franklin Park. (THE BLADE/LORI KING)

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