Rachel Van Aken

Rachel recently received special honors as top lab technician in Richmond Magazine’s annual “Top Docs” publication.

“It’s exciting to receive (the honor). I always try to do my best and apparently someone noticed and thought I should receive it, so that is cool.”

Where do you work?
I work in neurology as a supervisor for neurodiagnostics.

How many years have you worked at the VA?
I started last September. I’ve worked with a lot of physicians here for the last 8 years, while working for VCU doing a similar job.

What was your most memorable experience while working at the VA?
I just like working with the patients. The Veterans have done so much for us; I just wanted to give back.

Tell us something about you that most people would not know.
I like to dabble with art, and I have green thumb.

What does being a VA employee mean to you?
I wanted to come here because I feel like I can make some sort of a difference for the Veterans here. I really like to learn new things all the time, and here I get to work more with IOM (intraoperative monitoring) experience to utilize my skills, which basically means I monitor everything all at once.
VETERANS FAR AND WIDE FIND PROSTATE CANCER CURE AT McGuIRE

Thanks to the nationwide scope of the Veterans Health Administration, a national referral program has allowed Veterans from around the country to descend on the McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond for treatment of moderate to aggressive forms of prostate cancer.

Prostate cancer is the second-most common type of cancer among American men, who make up the largest population of Veterans. The most common form of treatment in most VA facilities is external beam radiation, a six to nine week process that involves treatments five days a week.

At McGuire, brachytherapy offers a much better option for Veterans. Brachytherapy is a form of treatment that involves implanting radiated seeds directly into the prostate, where the seeds attack and eliminate the cancerous cells.

McGuire’s brachytherapy program dates back to the 1997. It was started by Dr. Michael P. Hagan, who is now the VA’s National Director for Radiation Oncology.

Dr. Drew Moghanaki, an attending physician in McGuire’s Radiation/Oncology department, currently leads the brachytherapy program. “What we offer is access to high-quality treatment of prostate cancer with minimal side effects and recovery period,” said Moghanaki.

Research has shown brachytherapy to be a more effective treatment for moderate to aggressive forms of prostate cancer. Additionally, the treatment minimizes radiation to the prostate area and is completed in one day, allowing Veterans to quickly get back to their regular lives.

Veterans from places like Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico and many other areas around the country have come to McGuire to take advantage of this innovative treatment. It’s only available in a handful of VA facilities, including McGuire.

For Veterans around the country whose local facilities don’t offer brachytherapy, the national referral program gives them a chance to receive top-notch care at McGuire without leaving the VA system. “Many Veterans prefer to stay within the VA,” said Moghanaki. “We make that happen. It increases access for Veterans in areas where the VA doesn’t offer radiation services onsite. We’re leaving no man behind.”

Nurse Practitioner Sandy Troeschel is the brachytherapy clinical program manager. She helps determine which patients are eligible to come to McGuire for brachytherapy and works with them to make treatment plans. Using the VA’s telehealth system, she is able to meet with Veterans through a video chat and walk them through the intake process. Once she has the information she needs to proceed, a social worker assists with arranging transportation to Richmond. Often, organizations like Mercy Medical Angels assist with transportation costs for Veterans who need it. “It has been very successful,” Troeschel said. “Patients have been very happy. It’s a fantastic program and it’s expanding.”

Carlos Alvarez, a Veteran who lives in Puerto Rico, was diagnosed with moderately aggressive prostate cancer. Local doctors were running out of options. That’s when he was referred to McGuire for brachytherapy. From that point on, the process was a quick and easy one, Alvarez said.

After Troeschel determined Alvarez was a strong candidate for the treatment, he came to Richmond for the procedure. “I went to Virginia, got everything hooked up, they did the procedure and the following...”
April is National Stress Awareness Month. Stress can happen to anyone on any given day. As individuals, we are placed in stressful situations from time to time. These situations can include being late for work, almost getting into a vehicle accident, having multiple projects due at the same time, or worrying about a sick child.

According to the American Academy of Family Physicians, stress can cause or make health problems worse if it is not addressed in a healthy and appropriate manner. When stressful problems arise, it is best to take a positive plan of action rather than push it to the side.

Here are three tips to help conquer stress:

TAKE SHORT BREAKS

The Pomodoro technique focuses on completing large tasks by using timed intervals with short spaced breaks. This technique helps improve attention to detail and concentration, as well as providing ample time for a short break.

For example: Work for 25-30 minutes, with a 5 minute break.

EXERCISE THE STRESS AWAY

Aerobic exercises, including jogging, swimming, cycling, walking, gardening, and dancing, have been proved to reduce anxiety and depression, according to the National Center for Biotechnology information.

Any exercise, such as cardio, yoga, and recreational sports, is beneficial for your overall health.

RELAX AND RECHARGE

Balancing our work, relationships, and relaxation is very important to maintaining good health. We may not be able to avoid stress, but we can minimize it by responding positively to the stressors that we encounter.

Take time for yourself! It is important for us to rejuvenate and recharge ourselves to prevent burnout. Simple things as reading a book, meditation, and a vacation for rest and relaxation are ways to help.
Local artist and Marine Veteran Kamal Bowen (left) greets Hope Kumme (center), certified music therapist, during McGuire’s Creative Arts Festival, March 20. This year, Veterans contributed 27 art entries in one of several categories: Art, Creative Writing, Music and others. Veterans shared their entries in front of a judging panel of VA volunteers and Richmond community members. Fourteen entries will move on to Buffalo, New York to compete nationally in October.

Sexual Assault Awareness Week: Information table attended by Yaritza E. Ilarraza-Santos, certified peer support specialist and Dr. Sarah Raymond, psychologist, acting military sexual assault coordinator.

To celebrate the 1-year anniversary of the Fredericksburg at Southpoint CBOC, employees gathered for a small party, April 4. Pictured above are: Tamaira Chapman (left), advanced medical support assistant; Dr. Sagayabama Rajakone, CBOC medical director; Valerie Sprouse, licensed practical nurse; Dr. Deborah Panebianco, section chief. Congratulations to all the employees for a wonderful first year!
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morning, I was on my way home,” said Alvarez. After Alvarez went home to Puerto Rico, the doctors at his local VA were able to follow up with him and had access to all of the information about his treatment at McGuire. “Everything is documented in their records,” said Troeschel. “It doesn’t matter if things are done here or at their home VA facility, all the information is there.”

For the brachytherapy team, the continuity of care is a key to success. “We’ve definitely improved access to brachytherapy for Veterans,” said Brachytherapy RN Steven Schlink. “We’re filling a need, bringing people from all over. So far, we’ve had nothing but positive feedback. It’s a great program.” Approximately 100 brachytherapy procedures are performed at McGuire each year. Some of these Veterans are from the Richmond area, but many are Veterans who have been referred from other areas and who otherwise might have had to resort to weeks of external beam radiation treatment.

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BLIND VETERANS WALK FOR A CAUSE

The McGuire VA Medical Center celebrated National Blinded Veterans Day, March 28, by holding a special walk to mark the 72-year anniversary of Blinded Veterans Association (BVA).

“The fact that the organization lasted 72 years is quite significant,” said Stewart Nelson, BVA communications manager. “A group of 100 Veterans organized the Blinded Veterans Association when there weren’t any blind rehabilitation services.”

At the time, this BVA group was considered quite visionary, said Nelson. He believes the founders would be proud to know the BVA is going strong in 2017.

Due to the rain, Veterans navigated the second floor loop above the mall area. Many participants had a cane and a personal guide leading the way.

“The walk here is pretty good,” said Veteran Nelson Jackson. “It’s good exercise too. Usually, I walk about a mile a day. I like to walk all the time.”

Leading the walk was Marine Vietnam Veteran, Woodrow Banks and his wife, Paula.

The husband and wife team comes to McGuire for his blinded rehabilitation services and other medical ailments.

“Before I got to this program, I had no hope. Now, I have hope,” said Woodrow. “They provide good training here – really good. They help out a lot.”

Paula agreed the staff here is wonderful and gave several examples of when staff went above and beyond for her husband.

“The blind can still live active lives,” said Paula. “The people are kind and resourceful and exemplify empathy.”

The couple learned skills to help them adjust and manage life with limited vision.

Life is pretty much the same after raising four kids, said Paula, there isn’t a whole lot of difference, except, she does all the driving.

“It is important to let people know that the blind should be recognized,” said Woodrow. “We can do everything everyone else can do.”
Seniors at McGuire VA Medical Center helped kids from a local Richmond childcare center during an annual Easter Egg Hunt in the south mall courtyard, April 13.

Twenty kids from the New Direction Childcare Center teamed up with residents from McGuire’s Community Living Center to hunt 300 eggs in the courtyard.

This social event unites Veterans with children of the future, said Danielle Orr, recreational therapist for CLC.

The kids crouched down with each command from Edith “Edi” Harris, nursing assistant for CLC, anxiously awaiting a signal, to start their Easter Egg Hunt.

The final command of “Go!” sent children scurrying into the field, running as fast as their little legs would allow.

CLC Veterans assisted the kids by pointing out eggs all across the lawn.

“I loved it,” said Robert Glass, Air Force Veteran. “These kids are fantastic; they are America’s future. You are looking at bank presidents; you are looking at business owners… You are looking at our future right there.”

After the kids collected their eggs, they participated in an exercise jam session with Denise “Neecey” Mor man, where they worked out to child-friendly tunes such as, “Roar Like a Lion, Squeak Like a Mouse.”

“I thought it was excellent, really excellent,” said Franklin Harper, Vietnam Veteran. “It really boosts moral for us Veterans, it really does. Just to see how the kids are; they are really special. It was amazing.”

Later, the kids had lunch with the Easter Bunny and Veterans in the CLC lunch room.

“We’ve found that intergenerational programming does wonders for the young people and the geriatric population,” said Orr. “Plus, it’s cute to see all the kids dressed up.”