

SPECIAL EDITION

# VISION

FOR EXCELLENCE



VA Healthcare VISN 4:  
Redefining Veteran-Centered Care

# Dear Veterans, fellow employees,



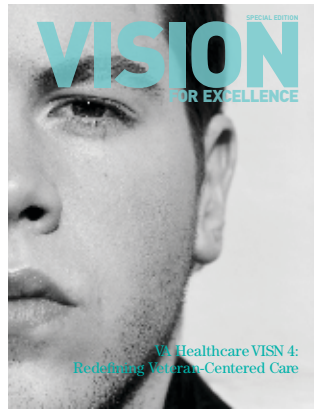
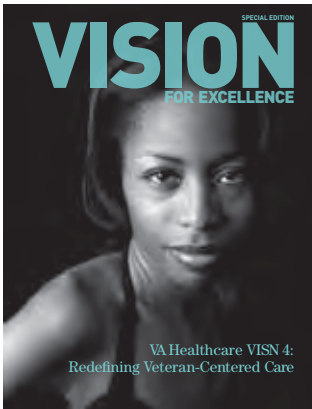
Director Moreland  
outside his VISN 4  
office in Pittsburgh.

“VISN 4 goes above and beyond to help our Nation’s heroes lead healthy, active lives.” —DIRECTOR MICHAEL MORELAND

# volunteers and friends of VISN 4:

This issue is different.

Let's start with our cover. For the first time ever, we have three of them. VISN 4 Veterans span all ethnicities, eras, socioeconomic backgrounds...and we want our publication to reflect this diversity.



Flip past the front page, and the collection of stories that ensue showcases another type of diversity. Each story—like our cover models—is very different. But together, these pieces show how completely VISN 4 goes above and beyond to help our Nation's heroes lead healthy, active lives.

Our health care community does an excellent job of balancing its vast reach with personalized, integrated and compassionate care. Sometimes this means we offer Veterans a warm place to sleep and a support structure to help them bounce back if they misstep. Other times it means we stand by them in the courtroom or welcome them home—fresh from combat—immediately after their plane touches down on American soil.

These stories—unique and surprising as they may be—deserve a moment in the spotlight. This publication gives them that. We honor real people caring for real heroes. We celebrate what makes us different and what defines us as VISN 4.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Michael E. Moreland'.

**MICHAEL E. MORELAND**, FACHE  
NETWORK DIRECTOR, VISN 4

**Philadelphia p16 | Pittsburgh p18 | Wilkes-Barre p20 | Wilmington p22**



# Called to Action

**HOW ONE VA EMPLOYEE IS SINGLE-HANDEDLY WAGING A WAR AGAINST HOMELESSNESS—AND WINNING** BY ANDREA YOUNG

**A**t the James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona, Pa., there are some tough boots on the ground. Well, actually size 7 ½ “Easy Spirit” pumps. The owner of the fashionable footwear—Homeless Veterans Coordinator Karen Vislosky—is a relative newcomer to the facility, yet she’s already built a virtual army of supporters who are helping her realize VA’s goal to end homelessness among Veterans within five years.

In this fight, Vislosky stays motivated by finding inspiration in the unlikelyst of places. In 2009, when a Veteran needed a pair of steel-toed boots to start a job, the social worker wrangled up donated funds to buy the shoes. The gift came with one caveat: The Veteran had to trade in his current, tattered pair of combat boots. “Those worn-out boots speak to the struggle of homeless Veterans,” says Vislosky, who still keeps the old boots in her office as a reminder “to put one foot in front of the other when times are tough... exactly how my Veterans live.”

Vislosky is also motivated by more direct means—the very Veterans she helps. Fred Farlow, 51, served four years in the U.S. Marine Corps. He has spent the last 10 years battling—and beating—addiction. Yet, when Farlow walked into Vislosky’s office last year,

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he felt little relief. His rough journey had left him homeless and with a spotty work history at best.

Even worse, Farlow’s experiences with social workers gave him little hope for change. “They pushed a form across the desk at me and told me they could help me in three months. I walked in there because I needed help that day!” Much to the Veteran’s surprise, Vislosky listened. She understood. “She knew I was doing my part, and she got to know me,” he recalls.

“I help them take small steps,” adds Vislosky. “They decide the next thing to do, and I figure out how the VA can help.”

With Vislosky at his side, Farlow gained job experience through the VA’s Compensated Work Therapy Program. Now a driver for Pyramid Healthcare, the Veteran works with people who are entering treatment themselves. Farlow has also received housing assistance through a program run by the VA and the Department of Housing

and Urban Development. “Thanks to this program and Karen, I don’t need to worry about a place to live ever again,” he says.

Just two miles away, Beverly Johnson Capece and her new husband, Jeffrey, live in a cozy apartment at the State Veterans Home in Hollidaysburg, Pa. When the Air Force Veteran, 71, moved from South Carolina to Cambria County in April 2009, she was hoping to right past wrongs and reunite with lost loved ones. Still hurt, they turned her away. “I had no place to go,” says Capece. “Then someone referred me to the VA outpatient clinic in Johnstown...this is how I found my angel, Karen.”

The Veteran also found love. “I came to the Veterans home on April 24 and on that first day, I met my husband,” says Capece, who married Jeffrey in October 2009.

Now, thanks to Vislosky and the VA, the pair has a place to call their own. Capece has decorated the apartment with Steelers memorabilia, handmade afghans and pillows, and smiling photos of her estranged loved ones—she has not given up hope just yet. The space also offers a beautiful view of the Allegheny Mountains out the kitchen window. “I love it, love it, love it,” says Capece.

For Vislosky, happy endings like these are the sweetest perk of a job well done.



Vislosky poses with a Veteran's tattered combat boots, which she keeps in her office for inspiration.

“More is not better; better is better. We need to do more, we need to do more together, and we need to do things faster, better and smarter.”

—VA SECRETARY ERIC K. SHINSEKI AT THE 2009 NATIONAL SUMMIT ON HOMELESS VETERANS



The newlyweds in their new home.



Veteran Farlow's future looks bright.



# Finally Home

**A SOLDIER AND HIS FAMILY STRUGGLE TO BUY A HOUSE AND THE BUTLER VA STEPS IN AND HELPS REDEFINE THE MEANING OF HOLISTIC HEALTH CARE** BY BETHANY MIGA

The year 2009 was a rough one for Ken Waltenbaugh. The breaking point came last summer. Ken, his wife Carol and their blind son Patrick were living in a modest, two-story home in Kittanning.

The house, says Carol and Ken, was a perfect fit. It was right on the bus line for Patrick, who attends Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children in Oakland, Pa. The house was also near Patrick's doctors, and it was a familiar space—one that Patrick was used to navigating.

Even more, the home—which Carol had lived in since age 3—“had huge sentimental value,” says Ken, 46, an active-duty communications specialist for the Pennsylvania National Guard's 56<sup>th</sup> Stryker Brigade. But when Carol's mother, who owned the home, passed away last summer, the Waltenbaugh's address was suddenly in jeopardy.

Carol applied for nine home mortgages to cover her mother's discounted sale price of \$30,000. She received nine rejections. “It was miserable,” says Carol.

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Carol and Ken outside their new home.



With his family's future secure: "Now I can worry about me getting better physically and mentally through the VA," says Ken, sitting in his living room with wife Carol and son Patrick.

Ken—who was sidelined with medical issues—watched his American dream turn into a nightmare. “We didn’t really have any other options,” he recalls. “So, we moved out and in with our daughter.”

During a trip to VA Butler Healthcare, the frustrated soldier mentioned his misfortunes to Tom Parsons, an Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) case manager. Parsons listened and immediately wanted to help. “This is a unique situation,” says Parsons. “I didn’t want to see a family that was still on active duty and getting medical treatment at the VA have any other difficulties piled on top of them.”

Parsons picked up the phone and called Bill Smathers, an OEF/OIF transition patient advocate for VISN 4. The two men exhausted several options before connecting with Vince Setnar, executive vice president of Clearview Federal Credit Union, which is based in nearby Moon Township, Pa.

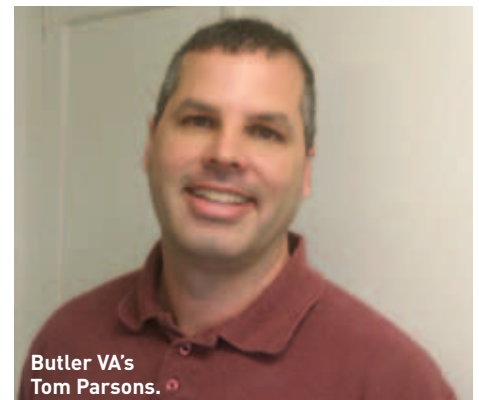
The pair drove to Clearview’s offices and pled Waltenbaugh’s case. Setnar con-

sidered the stakes, including the family’s less-than-perfect credit. One thing worked in Ken’s favor: “The military runs deeply through my veins,” says Setnar, whose son is a Marine Reservist and whose father is retired military. “I know the integrity of military folks, and I had no problem taking on the additional risk.”

After meeting Ken, Carol and Patrick, Setnar offered the Waltenbaughs the mortgage that no other financial institution would give them.

Today, the ink on the paperwork has dried and the family is settling into their new home. Ken is still adjusting to the dream come true. “I still don’t believe it at times,” he says.

The soldier is similarly surprised that the VA’s help extended so far beyond health care. “Bill and Tom didn’t have to do any of this, but they made it their personal mission to help,” says Ken. “I’ve spent 20 years in the military, and I’ve been nothing but a number for years. Now, I don’t feel like a number anymore. I feel like a person...that really feels good.”



Butler VA's Tom Parsons.



Clearview's Vince Setnar.



# Medicine Outside the Box

**ONE VETERAN'S WEEKEND OF HEALING (THERAPIST'S COUCH NOT INCLUDED)**

BY BETHANY MIGA

**W**illiam “Dutch” Howard is stepping outside of his comfort zone today. And it is a big step. An almost unthinkable leap.

The Vietnam Veteran, 50, is one hour into a camping trip at the Broken Wheel campground in Lewis County, W.Va. His weekend agenda is filled with crackling fires, fishing and gazing at star-studded skies alongside 18 other Veterans.

Right now, though, Howard is sitting alone on a picnic bench, dressed in jean

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shorts and a white T-shirt. He looks equal parts cool and tough with a skull cap and smattering of forearm tattoos. But his heart is racing. He is hoping that his medication keeps him calm.

“This is a really big deal,” the Veteran nods to the cluster of tents—and campers—just beyond. “I couldn’t have imagined myself doing this even three years ago.”

Howard—who has struggled with debilitating anxiety issues and bipolar disorder since suffering a nervous breakdown in 2003—is a patient at the Louis A. Johnson VA in Clarksburg, W.Va. In recent years, the Army Veteran has lived in self-imposed exile with his wife on their farm in Joetown, W.Va.

“I don’t like to go out in public. I just get too paranoid and afraid, and then I build up walls and become an angry person and isolate myself,” says Howard, tussling with a pair of headphones—a tool that he uses to help him relax. Detach.

While a weekend of camping is highly unusual for Howard, it is a regular practice at the Louis A. Johnson VA. The facility’s recreation therapy program (see box on opposite page) hosts some 160 community reintegration trips each year.

“These trips do more than just get patients out of the hospital,” says Frank Blake, a recreation therapist at the facility. “They are—more than anything else—about helping Veterans reintegrate into society and encouraging them to lead a healthy lifestyle.”

In addition to running through the usual lineup of outdoor festivities—including

“It’s just nice to get out of the hospital setting for a bit,” says Howard.





“This is a really big deal. ... I couldn't have imagined myself doing this even three years ago.”

—VETERAN WILLIAM “DUTCH” HOWARD



“We're going to play a couple games, do a little fishing,” says Howard, far left, with his bunkmates for the trip.

roasting marshmallows for s'mores—Blake and his fellow recreation therapists will spend the weekend talking with the campers about serious topics such as developing coping and resiliency skills and how to manage anger and stress.

“These trips give Veterans the chance to socialize and build their confidence while also learning recreational and life skills,” says Blake. “The Veterans really open up when we get them outside of the hospital. It is therapy, but in a very relaxed setting.”

Howard—who has bailed on his treatment program at least twice before—is now one step closer to fulfilling the promise he made to his wife to finish his therapy. “When I get better, I just want to be able to take her out to dinner,” he says quietly. Earnestly. “I have it all planned out.”

But for now, the Veteran is still sitting calmly at the picnic table, squinting as splashes of sunshine slip through the trees. Soon, he will join his bunkmates in an empty seat near the blue and gray tent they pitched just moments before. The men will hold a steady conversation. Howard will laugh among the almost-strangers. For once, it will all seem easy...and though he is not there yet, it is another big leap in the right direction. Another mountain climbed.



Recreation therapist Blake.



Howard helps set up his group's tent.

## RECREATION THERAPY AT THE CLARKSBURG VA

Every year, some 210 Veterans go on “out-trips” through the Louis A. Johnson’s recreation therapy department. In addition to camping, the department’s three full-time recreation therapists take Veterans to baseball games, dinner-and-a-movie outings, kayaking and more. This therapy is in conjunction with the care Veterans receive while participating in any of three major clinical programs: a 63-day post-traumatic stress disorder program, a 21-day substance abuse program and a six-week psychosocial rehabilitation program. Blake and his colleagues are also fitness trainers for the medical center’s outpatient exercise program, and they do extensive in-house therapy sessions with the facility’s Community Living Center patients.



# Finding Their Way

**THE MARY E. WALKER HOUSE AT COATESVILLE VA MEDICAL CENTER GIVES WOMEN VETERANS A SECOND CHANCE**

BY KATHLEEN POMORSKI

“I’ve been given a true gift. I’ve learned to love myself again,” says Linda Bullock, 47, an Operation Enduring Freedom Veteran from Baltimore. Bullock used to work as a surgical technician at the Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. But, after a bout of bad luck, the Veteran moved into the Mary E. Walker House—a transitional residence for female Veterans in need—on the Coatesville VA Medical Center’s campus.

As a statistic, Bullock is not alone. Currently, 26 female Veterans live in the Mary E. Walker House. Many of these women first arrived at the VA with some heavy baggage—including behavioral health and substance abuse issues.

“The many challenges that these women face are very real and very serious. They have to want their lives back and be willing to work hard at it,” says Marsha Four, a Vietnam Veteran who has short gray hair,

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warm blue eyes and a deep commitment to the mission of her work. As the director of the Mary E. Walker House, Four has spent most of her adult life advocating for Veterans who have lost their way. “The program is a refuge for women who haven’t given up and who believe that there is a better way of life out there, waiting for them, if they work for it,” she says.

To help female Veterans make the most of their journey, the Walker House arms its residents with a full set of resources and life skills—everything from employment help and financial planning assistance to educational opportunities. The women also receive individual and group

therapy and full VA outpatient medical and behavioral health services at the nearby Coatesville VA. Perhaps even more valuable, the residents feel—sometimes for the first time ever—that they belong to a supportive community that understands their struggles.

For Bullock, the program has been nothing short of life-changing. “I don’t know where I would be if I hadn’t found this program, but I know for sure that I cannot get where I’m going without it,” says Bullock, who began studying for a bachelor’s degree in early childhood education in fall 2010.

Four is confident that Bullock will get there. She has seen the transformation so many times before: women walk through the doors of the Mary E. Walker House broken and leave whole. Smiling. Hopeful. “It is a sight that I never get tired of,” says Four. “These women are fighters, and I’m blessed to be a part of their journey.”



The Mary E. Walker House.



Veteran and Walker House resident Bullock.



A group therapy session at the Mary E. Walker House.

“I don’t know where I would be if I hadn’t found this program, but I know for sure that I cannot get where I’m going without it.”

—VETERAN LINDA BULLOCK

## ABOUT THE MARY E. WALKER HOUSE

Though it is located on the Coatesville VA campus, the Mary E. Walker House is run by a nonprofit called the Philadelphia Veterans Multi-Service and Education Center, which specializes in helping Veterans in need. Since the program’s launch in January 2005, the Mary E. Walker House has served as a refuge for some 172 women Veterans from across the country. Residents can spend up to two years in the house, though the average tenant’s stay lasts just 10 months, according to Four. The program can house up to 30 women at any one time, and it is named for Dr. Mary E. Walker, a Civil War Veteran and the only woman ever awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.

To learn more, visit [www.pvmsec.org](http://www.pvmsec.org) or call 610-380-0704.





# Healing Minds

**HOW THE VA IS HELPING ONE MAN—AND A NEW ERA OF SOLDIERS—  
COPE WITH TRAUMATIC BRAIN INJURY** BY HEATHER FRANTZ

**W**hen John Parmarter returned home in 2006 after a yearlong tour in Iraq, he was excited to step back into his career as a social worker helping people with mental illness. Surprisingly, though, the former National Guard specialist struggled with the transition. “I kept forgetting things and screwed up a lot of paperwork, but I just thought it was because I was getting older,” recalls Parmarter, 40.

The Erie, Pa., native stumbled in his personal life, too. “I double-paid some bills... then my utilities would get turned off because I would forget to pay for them.” The memory lapses were so severe, the Veteran would sometimes forget to eat, and he nearly lost his home after being chronically overdue on his mortgage payments. “The part of my brain that used to help me organize things suddenly didn’t work anymore,” he says.

Parmarter shared these troubles with his physician at the Erie VA, and tests soon revealed the root of the Veteran’s forgetfulness: traumatic brain injury.

Called TBI for short, traumatic brain injury occurs when a sudden trauma to the

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head results in disrupted brain function. Symptoms of TBI can vary according to the severity of the injury and can include increased confusion, blurred vision, headaches, anxiety, trouble remembering things and trouble concentrating.

For Parmarter, the diagnosis made sense. In Iraq, “I got blown up all the time,” he says—half joking and half serious. One day, in the final stretch of Parmarter’s tour, a blast from a nearby improvised explosive device was so powerful, it knocked the soldier off his feet.

In 2007, the VA launched a TBI screening initiative to connect soldiers like Parmarter with help as soon as they stepped off the battlefield. As a result, nearly 400,000 Veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan have cycled through VA facilities and received TBI screenings. More than 54,000 of these men and women have tested positive for TBI and received follow-up care and evaluations, according to Anthony Mancini, a psychiatrist who works with TBI patients at the Erie VA.

Parmarter—despite his late start—received help quickly. Doctors immediately enrolled him in Erie VA’s Polytrauma Support Clinic, which engages experts in primary care, physical therapy, social work and occupational therapy. Each expert met with the Veteran one-on-one. Next, the staff collaborated to develop a

## **TBI: A GROWING CONCERN**

Recent studies suggest that current troops endure more explosive attacks in the field relative to soldiers of previous wars. Consequently, an unprecedented 30 percent of Veterans who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq have TBI, according to Walter Reed’s Defense and Veterans Brain Injury Center.

**TBI can cause a wide range of functional short- or long-term changes in the following categories:**

- **thinking** *memory and reasoning*
- **sensation** *touch, taste and smell*
- **language** *communication, expression and understanding*
- **emotion** *depression, anxiety, personality changes, aggression, social inappropriateness*



Parmarter in 2006 in Iraq.



The Veteran outside the Erie VA in May 2010.

“The doctors at the Erie VA have helped change my life for the better.”

—VETERAN JOHN PARMARTER

comprehensive treatment plan specific to Parmarter’s case. This process is standard for every Veteran who cycles through the clinic, says Mancini.

Beyond offering health care services, the Erie VA also provides Veterans with adaptive equipment to help them regain some of their lost independence. Parmarter received a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA)

to help combat his short-term memory loss. He also uses several dry-erase marker boards to keep track of errands like upcoming medical appointments.

Thanks to these tools and the treatment he’s received at the Erie VA, Parmarter is regaining a sense of control in his life—and he is hopeful about his future. Recovery statistics on TBI are similarly encouraging;

nearly 90 percent of patients with a mild TBI bounce back within a year.

“The doctors at Erie VA are great, and they have already helped change my life for the better,” says the Veteran, who adds that he still has some healing to do. “But I’m not a slacker and I won’t give up—that’s just not who I am.”

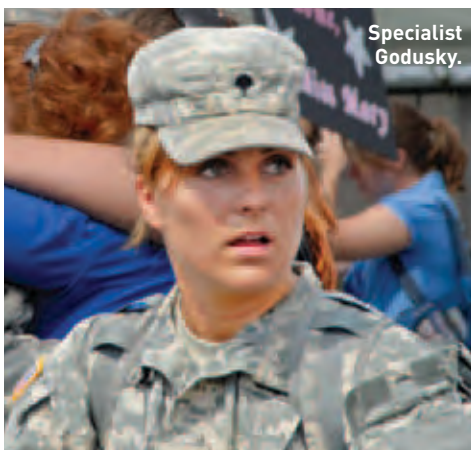


# A Warm Welcome Home

**THE LEBANON VA SPEARHEADED AN EFFORT TO GIVE SOME 3,900 TROOPS FRESH FROM IRAQ AN UNPRECEDENTED INTRODUCTION TO VA HEALTH CARE** BY BETHANY MIGA

Specialist Britnei Godusky's plane has just touched down at McGuire Air Force Base in New Jersey. It is September 2009. She is finally home after spending eight months in Taji, Iraq. By September's end, some 3,900 members of the Pennsylvania National Guard's 56<sup>th</sup> Stryker Brigad—Godusky included—will have shed their military lives and assumed a new rank: Veteran.

But right now, 23-year-old Godusky from Carlisle, Pa., is striding off the tarmac. She is all smiles. "I was thinking about was seeing my family and boyfriend...and wearing my hair down for a day," she would later recall. Free health care coverage—and the



Specialist Godusky.

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VA—were the last things on her mind.

"I actually hadn't heard anything about the VA," says Godusky with a shrug. "I thought it was just for old people."

Godusky is not alone. "When it comes to our newest generation of Veterans, we've

"It's great to know that there is somebody out there to help us now that we're back," says First Lt. Phoenicia Lewis (shown first from left).



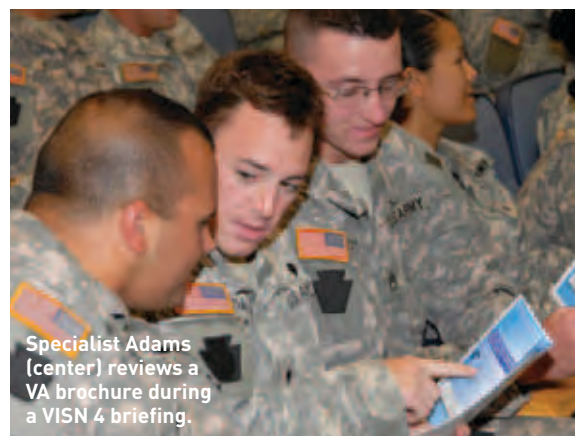


Veteran Dan Nadon-Rzasa talks to Coatesville's Stacey Castel about signing up for VA health care.

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**The Brigade's return marked the second largest demobilization of the Pennsylvania National Guard in the last 50 years.**

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Specialist Adams (center) reviews a VA brochure during a VISN 4 briefing.

learned that more than half of them may not use their VA benefits," says Lebanon VA Director Robert Callahan. "That's just not good enough. We want every soldier to access and be aware of the health benefits that they've earned by serving their country."

To counter this trend, Callahan's facility recently led an unparalleled, VISN-wide initiative to connect with the incoming troops. Throughout September 2009, VISN 4 employees traveled to Fort Dix Army Base in New Jersey, where the 56<sup>th</sup> Stryker Brigade demobilized. There, the group held roughly 45 briefings on VA health care, and they worked alongside the Pennsylvania National Guard and the national VA to help enroll every returning soldier in the VA system.

The VISN 4 crew often met with the troops only hours after their return to American soil. "Our timing was crucial," says Gretchen Roberts, VISN 4's Operation Enduring Freedom/Operating Iraqi Freedom program coordinator, who directed the briefings. "These soldiers were eager to see their families and friends and quickly transition back to civilian life. If we didn't reach them while they were still on base, we might never have seen them again."

More importantly, says Roberts, the briefings introduced the troops to the very VA employees who would be helping them uti-

lize their health benefits back at home. "We personally introduced the soldiers to their hometown Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom program managers," she says. "They headed home knowing exactly who to call if they had questions about their VA care."

Godusky, for one, is thankful for this personal introduction. "I think that it is a really good idea for [the VA] to come here

and talk to us. It was really convenient," she says after her VISN 4 briefing—and upon discovering that the health care system treats Veterans of all ages, male and female alike.

Adds her colleague, Specialist Keith Adams from Philadelphia: "This was really special. Had the VA not been here, I wouldn't even have thought about my benefits. Now, I'm enrolled."

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## Veterans are guaranteed VA health benefits for five years from their discharge date.

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Philadelphia VA's Lori Mass tells soldiers about VA benefits during an informational session at Fort Dix Army Base.



# A Second Chance

**A NEW PROGRAM AT THE PHILADELPHIA VA IS HELPING TROUBLED VETERANS TURN THEIR LIVES AROUND—ONE COURT CASE AT A TIME** BY ARIN GENCER

Vincent Rodgers Sr. was on a path of self-destruction last December when the truck he was driving slipped on a patch of ice, flipped and smashed into a tree.

It took nearly an hour to free the Navy Veteran from the vehicle. With a blood-alcohol level well above the legal limit of .08, Rodgers racked up his third DUI just before he was to start serving a 90-day sentence for his second.

“I didn’t even realize I was so intoxicated,” recalls Rodgers, 54, of Philadelphia. “When I got behind the wheel of that car, I wasn’t thinking of getting caught. It was a real dark time in my life.”

But later that winter, Rodgers’ life took a turn for the better when he received a letter from Philadelphia’s municipal court. The Veteran had a choice: he could go the usual legal-system route, or he could participate in a new program called Veterans Court.

The program, which launched in January, marks a unique collaboration between the Philadelphia VA Medical Center and the city’s municipal court system. Veterans Court aims “to take a negative set of

“I thought...what the heck do I got to lose?”

— VETERAN VINCENT RODGERS SR.

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circumstances and turn them into an opportunity for Veterans to get treatment and benefits that are available to them,” says Rebecca Hicks, a Veterans justice outreach specialist with Philadelphia VA.

The program connects former servicemen and women with VA resources that



Philadelphia VA's Rebecca Hicks and Rodgers in court in June 2010.





Judge Dugan and Hicks.

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## The formula is simple: Veterans charged with a crime can stand before Veterans Court and opt to receive treatment services in lieu of a harsher punishment.

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can help them combat the issues at the root of their legal troubles. The two parties—Veterans and the VA—share the same goal: “To really minimize or avoid jail time as much as possible,” Hicks says.

Like Rodgers, many of the program’s nearly 80 participants are dealing with substance-abuse problems, Hicks adds.

“It’s instant justice, instant service, and that’s what’s great about the court,” says Judge Patrick Dugan, one of two judges who hears the cases and has served as an Army reservist in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rodgers, who says he started drinking at age 10 and recently began using cocaine, is one of the first Veterans to enter the program.

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# NEARLY 10%

OF ALL INCARCERATED  
INDIVIDUALS ARE  
MILITARY VETERANS.

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“I had no idea what was involved,” he recalls. “But, I thought, ‘What the heck do I got to lose?’”

With Hicks’ help, Rodgers entered an intensive inpatient substance-abuse program at the Coatesville VA Medical Center. His road to recovery involved a rigorous, 35-day detoxification and recovery regimen. In addition to receiving meals, medication and daily monitoring through the program, Rodgers took addiction-recovery classes, which he credits with giving him the ammunition to overcome his “addictive personality problems.”

“He really did look at it as an opportunity, and he just accepted all services with open arms,” Hicks says. “He really should be proud of himself.”

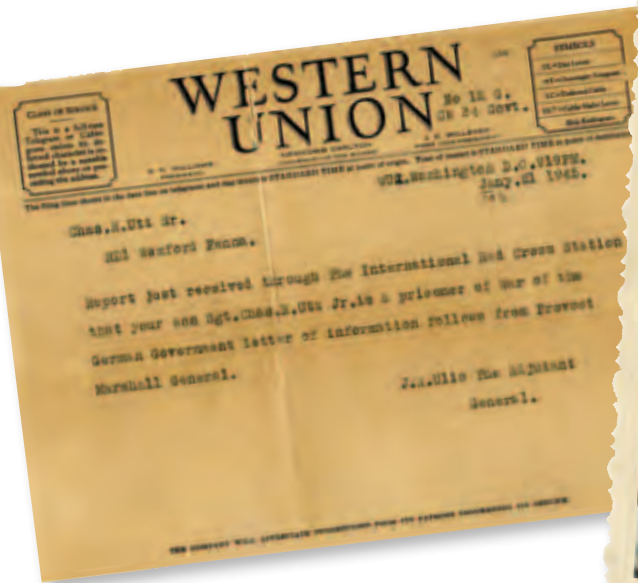
The Veteran’s son, Vincent Rodgers Jr., says he’s seen significant changes in his father.

“It’s amazing,” says Rodgers, 26, who lives in Manahawkin, N.J. “And it’s all due to the VA. He gave up his will and gave it over to them. I’m thankful for that.”

The court sentenced Rodgers Sr. to 30 days in jail for his third DUI, but his treatment at the VA counted as time served. Now, he attends addiction-recovery classes twice a week and reports to jail on weekends to satisfy his sentence for his second DUI.

A master carpenter, Rodgers says he is determined to continue his transformation.

“The whole experience has just been enlightening, and I feel like God is all around me,” he says. “And I feel like my brothers are helping me—the Department of Veterans Affairs.”



From left: A telegram reporting Utz's capture; a photo of the B-17 tail gunner shortly before leaving for war; the Veteran now.

# An Uncommon Bond

**FOR THE LAST 25 YEARS, EX-POWS HAVE BEEN RECONNECTING—AND HEALING—THANKS TO A UNIQUE, INTEGRATED HEALTH PROGRAM AT VA PITTSBURGH**

BY MEGHAN HALLORAN

Once a month, in a quiet conference room on VA Pittsburgh's Highland Drive campus, groups of Veterans come together to sip coffee, snack on donuts and socialize. In total, more than 100 men—many accompanied by wives—are enrolled in a unique support program for former prisoners of war.

Beyond the small talk, the participants spend the hour-long sessions sharing war stories and receiving primary care tips and behavioral health support. "They come in bad weather, snow and rain because this group is so important to them," says Dr. Bernadette Lauber, the program's coordinator.

The sessions have empowered many ex-POWs to confront experiences and emotions that they had locked away more than half a century ago. During World War II, John "Jack" McCracken of Ligonier, Pa., spent eight months in a German prison camp. When he joined the VA Pittsburgh program in 2006, "I was having a lot of

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flashbacks," says McCracken, 89. Today, he is no longer haunted by the memories of his imprisonment. "Being with other ex-prisoners of war really helped to get it out of my system."

Adds World War II Veteran Charles Utz, 84, of Wexford, Pa. "If you have a problem, you can talk to someone that has a similar problem...It's a good deal."

Frank Kravetz, a World War II Veteran from Pittsburgh, would agree. "You bond together rather quickly, and we're glad to meet each other, and we're always very sad when someone leaves," says Kravetz, 86.

Currently, the program is divided into

four sections: Korean War Veterans, World War II Veterans, 106<sup>th</sup> Division World War II Veterans and a widower's group for ex-POWs from any era. "There are probably a handful of these programs left, and VA Pittsburgh has one of them," says Dr. Lauber.

Kravetz, for one, is thankful for the support. "The benefit of this program is that you get to speak out and tell your story," he says. "I would never have been able to talk like this before the program. Never."

**“They come in bad weather, snow and rain because this group is so important to them.”**

— DR. LAUBER ON VA PITTSBURGH'S EX-POW GROUP



At left, McCracken in May 1944, when he worked as a flight engineer on a B-17 bomber. Above, the Veteran now.

“We’re a band of brothers and sisters.”

—VETERAN JOHN PETRUSKA, WWII



Kravetz, above in 2009, served as a tail gunner in the Air Force’s 457 bomb group. At right, his service photo.



“These people understand.”

—VETERAN MICHAEL HONKUS, WWII’S 106TH INFANTRY DIVISION



## DR. BERNADETTE LAUBER ON WHY THIS PROGRAM MATTERS

**IT HONORS HISTORY** “This program is important to the VA because of the history that these gentlemen have and what they’ve sacrificed. The VA needs to keep that history alive.”

**IT HELPS THEM COPE** “For many years, these men wouldn’t talk about their experiences and some didn’t even ac-

knowledge that they were POWs. This group has allowed them to be proud of their military experiences.”

**IT ENCOURAGES CAMARADERIE** “For the men and for their wives, this group has been a huge source of support for them over the years. They’ve all made wonderful friendships.”



# A Summer to Remember

**THE MEDICAL CENTER'S YOUTH VOLUNTEER PROGRAM HELPS A TEENAGE GIRL AND A VETERAN REVISIT THEIR RUSSIAN ROOTS—AND FORGE AN UNLIKELY FRIENDSHIP** BY SHELLEY NULPH

**Editor's note:** On Nov. 19, 2009, Veteran Basil Balaker passed away at Wilkes-Barre VA's Community Living Center. He was 90 years old. His story below reminds us all to "take the time to connect with—and pay tribute to—the many Veterans who walk through our health care system's doors," says Voluntary Service Specialist Deb Schlosser.

Until last summer, Basil "Val" Balaker had not uttered a word of Russian in years. During World War II, the Mountain Top, Pa., native traveled throughout Eastern Europe working as a Russian inter-

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preter for the Army. After the war ended, "I lived in the Soviet portion of Germany and worked as a sort of peacekeeper," recalls Balaker, a resident of Wilkes-Barre VA's Community Living Center.

Until about three years ago, Renata C. Newell had not uttered a word of English in her life. In 2006, an American couple

adopted Renata, then 10, and the young girl moved from Bryansk, Russia, to live with her new family in Dallas, Pa. The strong-willed, helpful and smart brunette left everything familiar—including her homeland and language—behind. "I was nervous because I didn't know if I would do well," she recalls.

Last summer, Renata joined the Wilkes-Barre VA's Summer Youth Volunteer Program, where she helped the geriatrics staff with its day-to-day tasks. She was surprised—and delighted—to meet Balaker and learn of his past. "Now I can speak Russian with somebody," says Renata, adding: "We talked about where he lived in Russia, where I lived, and how it is now."

The pair became fast friends and bonded over their love of the Russian language. One day, as the duo sat reminiscing, Balaker realized that he had even worked for a while in Renata's hometown.

"During my enlistment, the government spent a lot of time and money educating me. I had a lot of experience in Russia, and I wanted to share my stories," says Balaker.

The feeling was mutual, according to Renata. "We just have too much to talk about," she says, adding that "I want to speak Russian with him before I forget. Speaking it with him helps me remember."



"It was wonderful," says Balaker of his time overseas (shown here with Renata).

# A CLOSER LOOK: WILKES-BARRE VA'S YOUTH VOLUNTEER PROGRAM



Youth volunteer Barry Schiel, left, tries his hand at painting.



“[The youth volunteers] want to learn, and they pick things up quickly. All of them are very friendly. I taught them how to handle a handicapped person.”

—VIETNAM AIR FORCE VETERAN GORDON WHITSITT, 59, FROM BETHLEHEM, PA.

“I heard a lot of surprising stories from the Veterans about what they did during the war. I thought it was pretty cool seeing smiles on their faces. I want to be a doctor. Maybe I’ll be a doctor at the VA. We’ll see.” —YOUTH VOLUNTEER BARRY SCHIEL, 13, FROM BEAR CREEK, PA.



John Paul, in tie-dye, with members of his Eagle Scout troop.



“I fixed up a VA courtyard for my Eagle Scout project. Lowe’s donated 10 flowers. The Veterans helped us dig holes. They really enjoyed planting. When you see the smiles on their faces, you can’t ask for anything more.”

—YOUTH VOLUNTEER JOHN PAUL BATH, 15, FROM SHAVERTOWN, PA.

Last year, more than 100 students ages 12 to 18 dedicated 4,723 hours of their time and talents to enrich the lives of Veterans at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center.



“The Youth Volunteer Program brings the spirit of youth back into the Community Living Center. The children help with all the activities. It’s like the Veterans have a grandchild for the day.” —MARIAN SKOMSKY, RECREATIONAL THERAPIST



# A Heroes' Wedding

**THANKS TO THE WILMINGTON VA, TWO VETERANS ARE NOW EN ROUTE TO LIVING HAPPILY EVER AFTER** BY BETHANY MIGA

**W**hen Pat Woosley, an Operation Enduring Freedom / Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF/OIF) case manager at the Wilmington VA Medical Center, first heard about a local win-a-wedding contest, she knew exactly who to nominate.

Suzy Van Pelt and Joe Gayder.

"Both served our country loyally and bravely while deployed in Iraq. Both are giving and genuinely caring individuals," recalls Woosley. "I work closely with them as their case manager, so I knew that they were engaged. I also knew that Suzy was in nursing school and money was tight. They seemed like the perfect fit."

So perfect, Woosley received permission from the couple and then plowed through at least six drafts until the nomination entry felt finished. "I almost knew its words by heart," she says.

The contest, sponsored by Deerfield Golf and Tennis Club in Newark, Del., would gift the lucky pair a wedding valued at more than \$30,000 and provide everything from the rings and centerpieces to the gown and bite-sized hors d'oeuvres.

To Woosley's delight, Suzy and Joe won.

The couple married on Aug. 14, 2009, in front of approximately 140 family members, fellow comrades and close friends. The event was a dream come true, says Joe, 28. "It was amazing. All of the little pieces worked out perfectly, and it was something that we probably wouldn't have been able to do on our own."

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The pair first met in the summer of 2007 and soon deployed for a yearlong tour in Iraq where they worked as specialists in the same unit—the 153<sup>rd</sup> Military Police in the Delaware National Guard. Today, after being honorably discharged from their posts, the Milton, Del. couple still serves in the National Guard.

When it came time to send out their wedding invites, "Pat was one of the first people we invited," says Joe.

"Without her, the wedding would not have happened," adds Suzy, 25. "It meant a lot to us to see her there."

The wedding also meant a lot to Woosley, who even delayed her family's vacation to attend. The sacrifice was worth it: "The

wedding was absolutely beautiful," she recalls, before proudly rattling off a long list of details—everything from the light green accents in Suzy's gown to the lack of clouds in the sky and the ceremony's cute fan-shaped programs.

Joe and Suzy say that they are surprised that the Wilmington VA helped them win a dream wedding. Woosley, on the other hand, considers this extra effort an integral part of her job. "Our care does not stop at the hospital. We take a personal interest in our returning Veterans and their lives," she says. "We help with employment. We help with housing. These men and women performed their duty to our country, and we strongly feel that they have earned the benefits offered at the VA."

Even more: "It was especially nice to be involved in a wedding—a creation of something strong and good—when we, as case managers, see a lot of despair," says Woosley. "Plus, it couldn't have happened to a more deserving, wonderful couple."



## WHAT IS DIFFERENT ABOUT THE OEF/OIF VETERAN?

**MIGUEL MARCOS, WILMINGTON'S OEF/OIF PROGRAM MANAGER, ANSWERS:**

"The OEF/OIF Veteran is typically in their late 20s and struggling with issues of school, a young family, work and multiple re-deployments. They have a higher level of behavioral health and musculo-skeletal problems and a higher demand for women's health services."



Woosley poses with the newlyweds.

## WILMINGTON'S OEF/OIF PROGRAM BY THE NUMBERS

- **100 percent** of traumatic brain injury, Iraq and Afghanistan post-deployment clinical reminders fulfilled
- **7** OEF/OIF-designated staff members
- **85 percent** of all newly-enrolled Veterans are actively case managed
- **1** new OEF/OIF medical wing now under construction
- **100 percent** of all identified polytrauma Veterans are actively case managed

Joe in Iraq.



The couple on their wedding day in Newark, Del.



Suzy, in uniform, with Iraqi youth.

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