WORKING TOGETHER

SUMMER 2009

PARTNERING IN VETERAN-CENTERED CARE

a new way to heal

An innovative program teaches VA Pittsburgh Veterans how to fly-fish and—in the process—helps mend their bodies and minds.

VAPHS
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

To all our partners:

Our summer issue reflects a growing effort to incorporate more voices—those of both Veterans and employees—into our publications. Since these newsletters are here to serve you, it's only logical that you should be the stars!

Embracing this challenge, writer Shelley Nulph and photographer Warren Park traveled 60 miles south of Pittsburgh to capture this issue's cover story and illustrate our commitment to healing—even far beyond the hospital walls. The end result of Shelley and Warren's efforts (flip to page 6 for the full story) highlights a national program called Project Healing Waters, which treats Veterans to the therapeutic benefits of fly-fishing.

But the voices of the VA Pittsburgh community do not end there. We also hear Dr. Judy Plowman's advice on how to better communicate with your doctor and talk with Dr. Debra Weiner about her research on acupuncture and knee pain (both on page 10). In addition, we have created a new section called "MyVA" where employees and Veterans sound off about their experiences at VAPHS (turn to page 4 to check it out).

This diversity of perspectives makes for a rich publication. It also makes for a very rich healthcare system, and one that I feel honored and proud to lead. (And consequently—as you have probably already noticed—this page contains snippets of letters written by the VAPHS community. This is yet another way to show you that your voices do matter!)

I cannot wait to see what you all say—and do!—next.

Sincerely,

Terry Gerigk Wolf, FACHE
Director and Chief Executive Officer
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

EDITOR'S NOTE

This summer, **Terry Gerigk Wolf** won the Veterans Health Administration's 2009 Communications Visionary Award! This annual award—which is open to all VA Medical Centers—recognizes a leader's outstanding commitment to communication. Congratulations (and thanks for listening), Mrs. Wolf!

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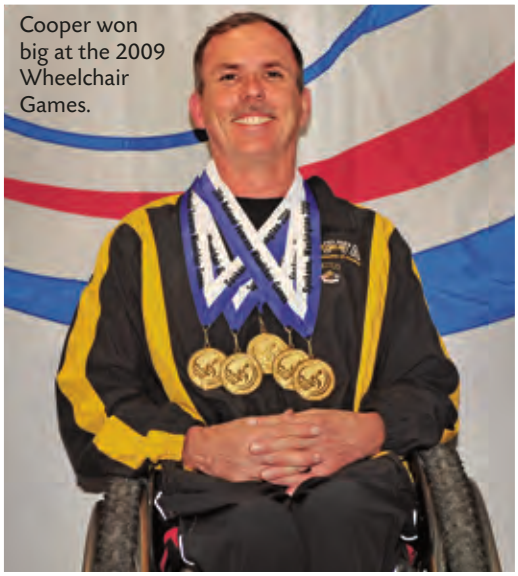
VAPHS
VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

{ thebragsheet }

Find out who is making news at VA Pittsburgh



Cooper won big at the 2009 Wheelchair Games.

< Twelve athletes from the Pittsburgh-based organization Keystone Paralyzed Veterans of America won a whopping **33 medals at the 2009 Wheelchair Games** in Spokane. "The Games are a big part of my life," says VAPHS researcher Rory Cooper, who snagged five golds in Spokane. "It's great to be among Veterans...we all support each other."

^ It's True! HERL is Still Excellent

For the third time in a row, VAPHS's **Human Engineering Research Laboratories**—a group devoted to investigating wheelchair technologies—has scored a prestigious five-year, 5 million dollar research award thanks to its renewal as a "Research Center for Excellence." Way to Go, HERL!

Engineering Better Care

VAPHS and the University of Pittsburgh nabbed a $3.6 million award to set up a **Veterans Engineering Resource Center** (VERC), which will apply engineering principles to common health care delivery issues.

Volunteer extraordinaire Clair

< VAPHS recently recognized volunteer **Norman "Norm" Clair** for working 22,500 service hours since 1991. As one of the healthcare system's busiest volunteers, Clair helps throw regular barbecues, bingo games and parties for Veterans at Heinz. "Norm is always willing to help, and he is handy in every sense," says Voluntary Leader Karen Cinnamon. Another plus? "He keeps us all smiling."

^ VAPHS's very own **Dr. Charles Atwood** was named a "Top Doctor" in pulmonary disease in the May 2009 issue of Pittsburgh Magazine. "It is an honor to be selected for this recognition," says Atwood.

Please put your hands together for the 2009 Cameos of Caring winners: **Marlene Lucas, Tawanda Roberts, Renita Parker and Janice Jones.** This award recognizes nurses who go above and beyond the call of duty—so Congrats, ladies!

{ myVA } Celebrating the voices of VAPHS Veterans and staff

Defying the Odds

The general belief is that when patients suffer a stroke, they have just six months to recover their skills. But Veteran John Balocik and the therapy staff at VA Pittsburgh are proving conventional medicine wrong.

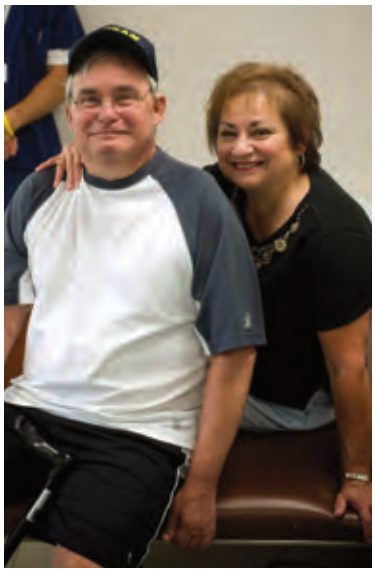
Pittsburgh local John Balocik describes his life, post-stroke, as "like living in a box." The assault on the Navy Veteran's body left him with slightly slurred speech and limited use of his left arm and leg. As the 62-year-old dealt with his anger, he also bade goodbye to all of his beloved hobbies: gardening, pistol shooting, tinkering around the house. Two years into his recovery—and after an unsatisfying stint at a local rehabilitation clinic outside of the VA—Balocik's "box" is finally, slowly, expanding.

"I have made dramatic strides since I've come here," says Balocik, who has just powered through two hours of intense physical and occupational therapy at Highland Drive, one of three such sessions he completes weekly. Since early May, when Balocik began his therapy at the VA, he has swapped his quad cane for a regular cane. His mobility has increased in other ways, too.

> "They had me doing things that I had never done before."
>
> **Veteran John Balocik**

"I get out of bed by myself. I walk faster," says Balocik. "I get in and out of the car better, and I sit down and get up a lot easier. I am doing the steps with a lot more ease."

"It's very motivating," says Balocik of his sessions at VAPHS (with physical therapist Mark Smallwood).



LEFT: "It's about everyone working together," says Balocik (with Smallwood) of his sessions at VAPHS.

RIGHT: "We have nowhere to go but up. It's just amazing," says Peggy of her husband's recovery.

At Balocik's old rehab clinic, his private insurance capped his sessions at 60 per year—no exceptions. The treatment was also costly, says Balocik's wife, Peggy. "It came down to an issue of paying for health insurance or making ends meet," she recalls.

"We would fight everyday because I didn't want to go. I was wasting my time and money, and I knew it," adds Balocik.

At a fellow Veteran's urging, Balocik enrolled in the VA, and his new therapists made an immediate impression. "I remember thinking, 'This is going to be good,'" he recalls. "They had me doing things—working on my balance and strengthening my leg—that I had never done before."

Peggy was equally impressed with VA Pittsburgh's stance on her husband's recovery. "We were told that as long as you're showing progress and willing to work, you can come," she says. "That makes us very excited."

Today, Balocik is still progressing—and pushing the boundaries of his physical world. Earlier this summer, he even picked up one of his old hobbies: he stained his deck using a transport wheelchair and his strong right arm. Above all, the once frustrated Veteran is now hopeful. "I love coming here. It just feels right," he says of his treatment at VAPHS. "It's like being home."

Q&A

Getting to Know VAPHS
one employee at a time

Sherri Fitzgerald
Night shift nurse on Unit 1-3 East at Highland Drive

Q What is the best part of your job?

A My co-workers! Also, the Veterans on our unit are here for extended periods of time, so we have the luxury of getting to know them and developing a trusting, therapeutic relationship with them.

Q What is your favorite area of the hospital?

A The entire Highland Drive campus is nice with all the green space and sidewalks. But, the best part is the underground hallways, which are great for getting a little exercise during a break, especially in the winter.

Jor-El Wilson
Army Veteran and a food service worker and peer mentor at Heinz

Q What is your favorite area of the hospital?

A I am a peer mentor for homeless Veterans, so I go to the [Veterans Recovery Center] and hang out a lot with the Veterans there to show them that they can make the change.

Q What is the most important lesson you've learned while working at working at VAPHS?

A Every day is a new experience. I enjoy serving with a smile, and I try to make it easier on nurses and get them through the line as quickly as possible since they only have 30 minutes for lunch.

A DAY FOR HEALING

Veterans spend a day casting their lines—and building friendships—on the shores of Pennsylvania's Beaver Creek stream.

WRITTEN BY SHELLEY NULPH
EDITED BY BETHANY MIGA

Conehead wooly buggers. Tiger rainbows...

As Al Zamiska sits, whipping his line through the water on a picture-perfect Wednesday in late May, he does not think about tumors, his eight turns on the operating table or his congestive heart failure and cancer diagnoses.

Chartreuse flies...

He does not think about his time in the Marines or in Vietnam, nor is he concerned about his current stay at VA Pittsburgh's Community Living Center—his fourth hospital admission in seven months.

Jig heads.

Instead, Zamiska's mind turns only to silly-sounding bait varieties. The rest of his world—his stressful, doctor-filled world—fades away, and the soothing splash of bait hitting water proves a welcome distraction.

"The only things they don't give you are the fishing line and the reel," says Zamiska of Project Healing Waters. "They take care of everything else—it's amazing."

Zamiska has always loved fishing. Before his health deteriorated, he would spend hours on his 14-foot boat calmly waiting for the next bite. But this spring, after a string of hospital admissions, the retired coal miner and construction worker found himself far removed from the familiar waters of southwestern Pennsylvania. "Since I got sick, I haven't been fishing," says Zamiska, 59. He was battered and bruised—not just physically, but spiritually, too.

Cue Project Healing Waters, a national, volunteer-run organization that introduces Veterans to the therapeutic benefits of fly fishing (to learn more, see the box on page 8). Zamiska, despite having cast his first line nearly four decades ago, was unfamiliar with the sport of fly-fishing. So, when he heard that Project Healing Waters was coming to VA Pittsburgh, he was intrigued—and eager to participate. As part of the program, the Beallsville, Pa. native spent his spring taking free fly-fishing skills classes at the Heinz facility every Monday night. There, volunteers taught the Veteran how to build his own fly rod and how to tie the sport's colorful and colorfully-named flies. "That hour class passed so fast," he says. "It was so enjoyable—I looked forward to it all week."

When rumblings of a fishing trip hit the hospital, Zamiska was ready. "I was really excited," he says. "I was happy to just get outside and take in the scenery with such good company."

Today, the Veteran is in the heart of the Laurel Mountains, 60 miles south of Pittsburgh. The weather is perfect—sunny and breezy. "Couldn't ask for a more beautiful day," muses Zamiska, who is perched at the edge of Beaver Creek, a premier trout stream, with a hand-tied fly at the end of his homemade rod. Save for his wheelchair and a tube pumping fresh oxygen into his airways, he looks the part of an outdoorsman, with a bright,

hunter's orange vest and a fishing-themed baseball cap.

Two other Veterans try their luck upstream, and a small team of Project Healing Waters volunteers hovers nearby. This event—a day of fishing—officially began when the transport van rolled away from Heinz's parking lot at 8:30 a.m. "But I was up at 5 this morning," says Zamiska. "I could hardly wait. I was all ready by 7."

At lunchtime, the men pull themselves away from the riverbed, and the volunteers serve the Veterans an assortment of picnic food: grilled hot dogs, pretzels, macaroni salad and sliced watermelon. "I'm having a great time," says Zamiska between bites.

Unfortunately, the fish do not seem to share his hunger. Hours before, a Beaver Creek stream manager had stocked the clear water with 100 trout, yet Zamiska—the seasoned outdoorsman—has still not caught a single fish. He does not let this detail drag him down. "Hey, I don't care if I catch one or not," he says. "I just enjoy being here."

The sun has begun to drop through the trees when the Veteran finally packs up his rod and calls it a day. He smiles as he waves and bids the group goodbye. Armed with a few cookies—and a few volunteers to help him navigate the uneven forest ground—he climbs into the transport van and settles in for the two-hour trip back to the hospital.

"There are just no words to express my thanks," says Zamiska later, his voice tinged with emotion. "I've made good friends. The volunteers were amazing...I definitely cannot wait to do it again."

"I WOULDN'T HAVE MISSED THIS FOR THE WORLD."

Army Veteran and Project Healing Waters participant Chuck Rock >

PROJECT HEALING WATERS

In 2004, while recovering from surgery at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, retired Navy Captain Ed Nicholson found himself surrounded by wounded comrades—and felt a sudden desire to lift their spirits. The avid fisherman pulled together a small group of patients and began teaching them how to cast and tie flies. These sessions left an impression and, one year later, Nicholson founded Project Healing Waters.

A private nonprofit, Project Healing Waters offers Veterans and wounded soldiers rod-building and fly-tying classes in addition to day-long fly-fishing trips. The organization's mission is to help these men and women momentarily escape their sterile hospital settings and reconnect with nature. In their quest for the sport's elusive big catch, many participants also bond, recharge and—in many ways—heal.

"It's good physical therapy, and then there's the emotional part," Nicholson has said. "You get out on a stream, the pain and discomfort go away."

Thanks to a dedicated team of fishing clubs, guides and enthusiasts, Project Healing Waters operates at no cost to its participants, including providing adaptive fishing equipment to meet a disabled Veteran's needs. Today, the program has grown to 12 regional chapters across the country, and it has served more than 1,000 Veterans and wounded soldiers.

To learn more, visit www.projecthealingwaters.org.

Fly-Fishing as Therapy: 4 Ways the Sport Helps Veterans Heal

VAPHS Recreation Assistant and Project Healing Waters supporter John Pinigis shares how fly fishing is therapeutic.

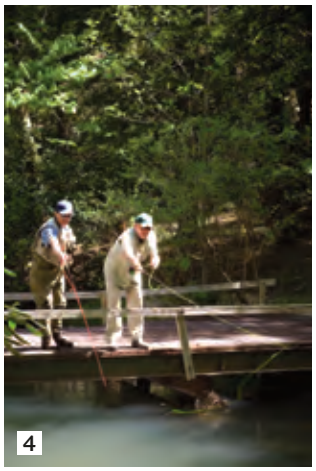
1 It offers Veterans an escape "It's a worthwhile—and fun—distraction during a difficult time for the Veteran."

2 It boosts confidence "Veterans experience a sense of accomplishment when tying a new fly or finally hooking a fish on a rod."

3 It gives them a chance to bond "Veterans build a valuable friendship with the volunteers from Project Healing Waters, sharing stories and laughter."

4 It gets them outdoors "When fishing, Veterans connect with the world around them. They get to view each insect that flies around them with a new sense of wonder. "

To get involved with Project Healing Waters at VAPHS, contact Pinigis at **john.pinigis@va.gov** or **412-822-3085**.



1. Volunteer Terry Mulvihill helps Veteran and first time fly-fisherman Dave Shelton. **2.** Zamiska watches as Volunteer Gregg Caldwell puts new line on his 25-year-old reel. **3.** Fly-fishing flies. **4.** Volunteer Mark Nemchick and Veteran Rock often fish together—including on today's trip. **5.** Weiss is all smiles.

Bringing Fly-Fishing to Western PA

Though fishermen commonly dot Pittsburgh's many rivers and streams, Project Healing Waters is relatively new to Western Pennsylvania. Yet, if Ron Weiss had his way, local Veterans would be lining up to take a trip with the organization.

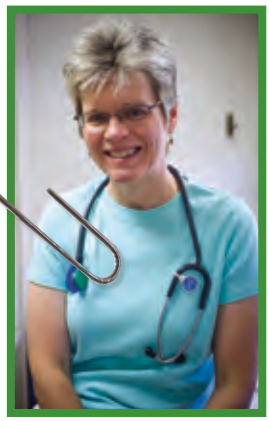
Weiss, who owns The Hook & Hackle Company, a fly-fishing supply store in Homestead, Pa., grew interested in the nonprofit after visiting Walter Reed Army Medical Center in 2007. "I do this in memory of my father, a World War II Veteran. I wanted to join the armed services but wasn't eligible, and I was raised to be very patriotic."

Today, his company is an official vendor for Project Healing Waters, and he leads a team of volunteers who are dedicated to fulfilling the program's mission. In tandem with Pinigis, Weiss and his crew teach classes at VA Pittsburgh's Heinz facility one day each week, and they have also escorted Veterans, like Al Zamiska from the preceding pages, on local fishing outings.

"Working with these men and women is a privilege," he says.

For more information about the Pittsburgh chapter of Project Healing Waters, visit **www.hookhack.com**.

{ expertscorner }



Dr. Judith Plowman, director of VA Pittsburgh's home-based primary care program, offers six sure-fire ways to ensure that your next doctor's appointment unfolds without a hitch.

1 Make a list "Before the appointment, write down the things that you want to discuss. If the list is long, prioritize by putting your most pressing questions first."

2 Remember your meds "Bring your medications with you or at least bring a list of what you're taking. Include non-prescription pills, vitamins, herbals; anything you take on a regular basis."

3 Invite a friend "Companions can remind you what to say during your appointment. They can also contribute their point of view and help you recall things after the session ends."

4 Arrive with pen and paper in hand "Take notes or ask the doctor or your friend to write things down during the appointment. This way, you won't forget anything before you get home."

5 Relax! "Try not to feel intimidated. Your doctor is smart, but no one knows you and your body better than you."

6 Get contact info "At the end of the appointment, ask your doctor what's the best way to contact him or her and ask if they have a nurse to call with questions."

Research Spotlight

Dr. Debra Weiner's acupuncture research aims to ease knee pain—one needle at a time.

Veterans living with chronic knee pain can enroll—now through October 2011—in a new acupuncture study at VAPHS. Led by Dr. Debra Weiner, a physician at VAPHS's Geriatric Research, Education and Clinical Center, the study looks at reducing knee pain in Veterans with advanced osteoarthritis and hinges upon a special kind of acupuncture called periosteal stimulation therapy or PST. Unlike traditional acupuncture's static prick, PST delivers electrical stimulation to the periosteum, a nerve-filled membrane that encases bones.

In a preliminary but smaller study on PST and chronic knee pain, Dr. Weiner found that "people who received PST had as much pain reduction as somebody who would take ibuprofen, and there were no significant harmful effects associated with the treatment."

Dr. Weiner's current three-year study attempts to answer how long PST's pain relief can last—and whether "booster" sessions can sustain the relief.

To enroll, Veterans must be between the ages of 50 and 89 and suffer from chronic, severe knee osteoarthritis.
Qualified candidates will complete hour-long PST sessions weekly for 10 weeks in addition to some follow-up commitments. In return, VAPHS is offering participants up to $325 and PST treatment at no cost.

Interested in participating?
Call 412-954-4919 or 412-954-4921.

{ mailbox }

Dear Director,

As a female Veteran using the VA Health Care System as my primary health care, I would like to commend the outstanding care I recently received.

I had a routine ultrasound performed on March 10, 2009. My appointment was at 1:30. I was taken early and the technician—I am sorry I didn't get her name—spotted a very large kidney stone that was obstructing my kidney. She called the radiologist who came immediately. I was given a CAT scan, saw Dr. Jacobs in urology, had blood work done and an appointment to schedule surgery and left the University Drive hospital at 3. By the time I got home, there was a message on my machine from my PCC doctor making sure everything had been taken care of.

It was wonderful to have everything taken care of so efficiently. All the staff involved was pleasant and extremely helpful.

I had my first surgery on April 13 and a second surgery on April 15. My surgery was performed by Dr. Timothy Averch and Dr. Bruce Jacobs. I am very fortunate to have such superb physicians.

I was a patient on 4W step down unit. The nursing staff and supervisor went above and beyond to give me the best possible care during my four-day stay. I would like to recognize Katie Dadum and Stephanie Ford who went out of their way to see that all my needs were met with kindness and grace. I can't thank them enough.

I am proud to be a Veteran, and you should all be proud of your hospital and care you are providing Veterans.

Sincerely,

JH

Service Awards

Congratulations to the following employees who recently reached a benchmark in dedicated service to the United States Government!

20 Years

Jacqueline Blake	Community Based Care
Catherine Bellamy	Clinical Support
Daniel Carmichael	Facilities Management
William Dold	Medical Specialty
Geeta Goswami	Clinical Support
Barb Harold	Clinical Support
John Kauss	Clinical Support
Susan Paprocki	Clinical Support
Barbara Pursh	Clinical Support

25 Years

John Hunger	Patient Care Services
Dale Logue	Business Service
Ruthe Lombardo	Office of Information & Technology
Charles Nelson	Clinical Support

30 Years

Cynthia Adams	Clinical Support
Andrew Wyant	Business Service

35 Years

Wayne Appman	Clinical Support
Robert Kulus	Community Based Care
Marsha Mauser	Clinical Support
Darlene Stuckey	Clinical Support

40 Years

Robert Gleaves	Clinical Support

{ haveyouheard? }

VAPHS is home to the only all-volunteer U.S. post office in the country. Located in the basement of Building 4 at Highland Drive, the full-service office is open Wednesday through Friday from 9a.m. to 1p.m.

Same Location...New Name!
A new contractor, Ambulatory Care Services, is now at the helm of the Belmont community-based outpatient clinic (formerly called St. Clairsville). The clinic's contact information—including its address and telephone number—remain unchanged. Another constant: Veterans can still expect to receive superior, VA-quality care.

Coming Soon: VA Pittsburgh's new, in-house mammography unit is slated to open Oct. 5. The unit will be located in the radiology department at University Drive, and it will run two days a week—Tuesday and Thursday—before moving to a full weekday schedule.

Thank You Lowe's! In early August, a team of employees from the home-improvement chain broke out their shovels to build a volleyball court and horseshoe pit for the Veterans Recovery Center at Heinz. "It's a nice way to give something back," says Lowe's employee (and Army Veteran) Joe Becar of the project.

N TALK

WHO: Howie Adams, a Heroes Hall volunteer and Vietnam Veteran.

Adam's pin signifies that he served in the Army's 1st Cavalry. "The diagonal line represents the sash that the men wore their sabers with and the horse head signifies cavalry...But don't let the horse fool you. In Vietnam, we went air mobile. Today it's all armor," says Adams who—for this photo—proudly donned another '1st Cav' signature piece: his black Stetson hat.

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Working Together serves employees, volunteers, patients and friends of VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System. To suggest editorial content for future issues or to request additional copies of this issue, please contact us at **412-822-3533** or **vaphspublicaffairs.gov.**