



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 good-bye 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



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**Veteran John Balocik**



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.

“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." 



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 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.