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The Victory Belles, a charming vocal trio performing the music of the 1940s and patriotic tunes in threepart harmony, serenaded a roomful of veterans in the Community Living Center at the Biloxi VA Medical Center Sept. 9. They also visited residents in some of the CLC neighborhoods after the show. The Victory Bells are based at the New Orleans National WWII Museum.

GCVHCS extends a big thank you to Papa John’s Pizza of South Mississippi and John W. Pace, Papa John’s Director of Marketing and Community Outreach, for coordinating the visit with GCVHCS.
Congratulations!

Veterans recognize exceptional staff members

By ELIZABETH WILLIAMS, MSN, RN, CNL
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System
Acute Care Nurse Leader

In June, the medical-surgical unit at the Biloxi VA Medical Center rolled out Welcome H.O.M.E. (Hospitality On Med-Surg Every day), a customer service initiative. The H.O.M.E. program was created by acute care nursing leadership to address facility metrics of veteran satisfaction through increased communication and engagement. Through the program, staff members are provided education and training on how to create a welcoming environment for veterans and their families who are away from their true home.

As part of the initiative, the team developed a way to receive feedback from veterans by using the new HOME survey. A segment of the survey gives veterans the opportunity to recognize staff members they encountered during their stay.

Since the start of the survey, veterans recognized Maria Marti, Lindsey Teague, and Patricia Harris for their extraordinary hospitality.
A lifetime of service for this volunteer

By MARY KAY GOMINGER
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Community and Public Affairs

BILOXI, Mississippi — On June 29, VA Volunteer Marcia Caplan was awarded the Outstanding Service Award by the Interim Director of the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System, Dr. Christopher Saslo. Caplan, who volunteered for the past 13 years at the Biloxi VA Medical Center, has moved back home to Connecticut, which is where her lifelong passion of service to others began.

Caplan’s first memories of volunteering span back to when she was just a child and her family volunteered at the VA Medical Center in West Haven, Connecticut, helping with bingo. Her father, a WWII veteran, received his care there. She remembers how it felt to volunteer, even though she was only eight. It feels the same today, she said, as it felt back then.

“Service to veterans is fulfilling,” Caplan said. “No matter what my mood when I walk in to volunteer, I am always more uplifted when I leave. For me, it feeds my soul.”

Caplan is also a veteran, having served in the U.S. Army during the Vietnam War. She has more than 30 years of combined military and federal service, including working for the Department of Defense, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, and the Department of Veterans Affairs.

“The VA has always been there for me and my family,” Caplan said. “This is my way of giving back. I look forward to being of service, of helping others. Occasionally, in my volunteer job, I get the chance to interact with a WWII veteran. I feel such a connection with my dad, and that thrills me,” she said.

In addition to volunteering at the Biloxi VA Medical Center two times a week, Caplan was involved with the Mississippi Honor Flight, escorting two WWII veterans on a flight from Gulfport to Washington, D.C., to see the WWII Memorial in 2011.

She has also volunteered for the past nine years with the Forgotten Heroes program and has attended countless funerals for veterans with no family or friends. To her, that is a special privilege, one she is proud to be a part of.

In May, Caplan spent the week volunteering at the National Veterans Golden Age Games, which were held in Biloxi, Mississippi.

As the long-standing information desk officer at the main entrance to the Biloxi VA Medical Center, her presence will be missed.

“Marcia is a great volunteer and she is always willing to go the extra mile to assist veterans.”

Additionally, she has trained other volunteers on how to properly man the Information Desk. She is a valuable asset to our medical center and we will miss her when she moves back home to Connecticut,” Bob Davis, GCVHCS Voluntary Services Officer, said.

Her parting advice to others who want to volunteer but don’t know where to start? “Start small,” Caplan advises. “Give a couple hours a week. Try new things until you find the one that you love. You will find, like I did, that volunteering opens your heart to more and you will be so glad you did.”

Marcia Caplan
BILOXI, Mississippi — If you’ve ever had to sit in the waiting room at your doctor’s office, you know how painful that wait can be. Whether it’s 15 minutes or longer, it can seem forever. VA Volunteer Anita McAllister found a way for veterans and their family members or caregivers to beat those waiting blues.

McAllister and Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Voluntary Service Assistant Sharon Ladner came up with an idea of a rolling book cart.

“I am very active in the community and I knew once people knew what we were trying to do and who it was for, we would have no problem getting books donated,” McAllister said. And she was right. The Ocean Springs Library donated five huge boxes of books. It was enough to get started.

McAllister is a member of American Legion Auxiliary Unit 42. Last year she served as the state president. She and five other ladies in the unit agreed this was a very worthwhile project. They have been offering free books and magazines for just about a year now, and, based on the feedback she receives from patrons, the rolling book cart is a huge success.

The book cart is located at the My HealtheVet office in the outpatient clinic area at the Biloxi VA Medical Center on Wednesdays and Thursdays. All books are free to any veteran, their family members, and their caregivers. Patrons can keep the books but McAllister finds that many veterans not only return the books they get off the cart, they also bring other books to donate.

“We had over 1,000 books donated,” McAllister said. “Veterans love our cart; we hear thank you every day.”

Recently, the volunteers started taking the rolling book cart up to the fourth floor, to the inpatient hospital area. That, too, has been well received.

McAllister has been a volunteer at the Biloxi VAMC for the past seven years. She and her group also offer cookies and coffee on the days they volunteer.

“We enjoy the conversation with veterans, she said. “You can learn so much history from hearing their stories. Our hope is that they get as much out of our interactions as we do. Our hearts are filled.”

If you have books or magazines you would like to donate for the rolling book cart, you can drop them off in Voluntary Services on the second floor of the Recreation Hall, Building 17, at the Biloxi VAMC.
Recognize the need for therapy

By HOLLY E. DREGER, LCSW
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Behavioral Health Service Line, Clinical Social Worker

Have you ever lost something and looked for it everywhere, only to discover it was right under your nose the whole time? It’s a common experience, and yet, sometimes through the process of looking we find other things we had misplaced or forgotten.

There is a story about a gentleman who lost his keys. A man comes along and observes the gentleman on his hands and knees in the dark, under a street light, looking for something. The man asks him what he is looking for, then begins to help the gentleman search for his keys.

After about ten minutes, the man turns to the gentleman, sighs in frustration and says, “I can’t find them, when did you last have your keys?”

The gentleman says, “Oh, I last had them over there at my house, but the light is better here for looking.”

Sometimes we hesitate to look for something in the darkened places, where things are less visible, perhaps more frightening. But to find what may be missing, we begin by looking in the right place.

The process of going into therapy is often one of searching. It begins long before a veteran seeks therapy. Not one patient I have worked with has ever said, “You know, for the first time ever I felt angry and depressed, so I came right into the clinic today to get help.” Everyone I have ever worked with sets out to fix the symptoms they are experiencing, often struggling for years to find a way to rid themselves of painful thoughts and feelings. Finally, out of tremendous pain and exhaustion, patients acknowledge that perhaps going in to talk with a therapist may be the only other solution they have not yet tried.

Recognizing and being willing to engage in therapy takes tremendous courage. Sitting with someone you do not know and sharing your most private thoughts, experiences, and feelings is often frightening. Fears of judgment, fears of being helpless, and fears that perhaps things will never be good again all contribute to hesitation in entering therapy. But the willingness to work through and push through these fears is the road that ultimately leads to transformation, change, adaptation and healing. The key is to be willing to be open to the process and the possibility of change. The process of healing and addressing traumas involves searching within, acknowledging loss, and working on acceptance that having flaws or vulnerabilities does not limit us from healing.

In the Wizard of Oz story, four strangers encounter each other under stressful circumstances. As the story goes, Dorothy, accompanied by her dog, Toto, has been displaced from her home and is desperately trying to return.

All four are transformed by the Oz adventure. They learned that everyone is flawed, has wounds, has fears and limitations. But they discover that their willingness to face their trauma and fears that had at one point protected them, that in facing their fears they’re able to heal and find personal growth beyond their initial trauma and wounds. They are transformed.

Each character in the story is symbolic of specific ways we react to a threat. Our neurological system is hard wired to keep us safe, and when faced with a threat, it will prompt us to respond in one of three ways: Fight (Lion), Flight (Scarecrow) and Freeze (Tinman). When our nervous system remains ‘stuck’ in a heightened pattern of reaction (hypervigilance), symptoms can result that keep the safety reaction stuck. Treatment (therapy) can help with identifying the stuck points and working through the traumas, using new skills that will replace maladaptive ones and reduce the symptoms. Dorothy and her dog, Toto, much like a therapy dog, walk the Lion, Scarecrow, and Tin Man down the road of healing. Therapy can do this as well. If you believe that you might be ready to find new ways to cope, please consider reaching out to VA and schedule a behavioral health appointment at your GCVHCS facility.

Like Toto, Dorothy’s pet in the Wizard of Oz, therapy dogs at the GCVHCS provide gentle, unconditional acceptance of Veterans, helping with their healing process.
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System attends second National Innovators Demonstration Day

By ELIZABETH WILLIAMS, MSN, RN, CNL
Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System Clinical Nurse Leader

Elizabeth Williams, Innovator Network mentor, and Jaime Hathorn, Innovation Network grantee, represented the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System at the second National VA Innovators Demonstration Day in Washington, D.C., August 8.

The National VA Innovators Demonstration Day highlights innovative efforts underway from across the country driven by the VA Center for Innovation (VACI), Innovators Network, and Diffusion of Excellence.

Dr. David Shulkin, Secretary, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs was the keynote speaker. He discussed 13 risk areas he has outlined for VA along with the five strategies he has identified to move forward and specifically how innovation can get us there.

“As innovators, we need to be innovating and solving the problems of our organization,” Shulkin said.

Hathorn was given the opportunity to showcase an innovation project for the Biloxi Community Living Center, along with other inspiring “innovators” from across the country.

During an innovation showcase, Hathorn displayed a poster portraying her project conducted while networking with other innovators from across the country. Hathorn’s project, Sensory Therapy for Veterans with Neurocognitive Disorders, focuses on creating a multi-sensory environment in every resident’s room and in their shared living area to offer stimulation and meaningful interactions for residents, especially those with neurocognitive impairments. Currently, the project is pending arrival of all the products and supplies which were recently ordered. Implementation is planned this fall.
Twenty years ago when Greg Byrd first received news that a wheelchair was going to be his mode of transportation for the rest of his life, he never dreamed that one day he would be able to compete in sports again. But this year, he did just that.

Byrd, a Mobile, Alabama, native and a Navy veteran, has been receiving his medical care at the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System for the past 20 years. At the 37th National Veterans Wheelchair Games, held July 17-22, in Cincinnati, Ohio, he won gold and bronze medals in the first few days of competition.

“I’ve seen veterans here that have been competing for 15, 17 years and longer at this event,” Byrd said. “This is my first year. I’m doing okay, but I am learning. It’s been very inspirational to see some of these athletes, people that are physically way worse than me, how motivated they are and the camaraderie they share.”

He continued, “I have run into a few old friends, people I never thought I would see again. And I’ve made more friends. We can stay in touch so much easier these days with social media. It’s a great way to network and connect with friends year-round.”

Byrd said he heard about the National Veterans Wheelchair Games, but it never occurred to him that he, too, could compete. Then his Recreation Therapist at the Biloxi VA Medical Center, Bobbi Hakanson, brought it to his attention and encouraged him to consider registering. She also assisted him in completing the application for a scholarship through Veterans Canteen Service to offset the cost of the trip. He received the scholarship and then got serious about training.

“Once I knew I was in, I starting going to the gym and watching what I ate, to get ready,” Byrd said.

“This has been a great experience. I’ve loved the competition and the atmosphere. The highlight of the week was the fact that my mom and sister came to watch me compete. It was eye-opening for them, to say the least. One thing I know for sure, I am definitely going to keep coming to this event,” Byrd said.

Byrd is affiliated with the Bayou Gulf State Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA).