inside....

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Dr. Edgar Dapremont  
Staff Ophthalmologist  
Chief, Eye Clinic, Surgical Service  
Biloxi VA Medical Center  
(Retired USAF, Lt. Col.)

What is your patient centered care philosophy?
I have been a staff ophthalmologist in the eye clinic since October 2015 and chief of the eye clinic since May 2016, after 33 years of private practice in Gulfport, Miss. My patient-centered philosophy, along with that of my staff, has remained the same. In the eye clinic, we are committed every day to deliver the highest quality eye care with understanding and compassion for our patients. The eye clinic optometrists and ophthalmologists in Biloxi, Mobile, Pensacola, and Panama City are assisted by a dedicated and experienced staff of health care technicians and Medical Administration Service personnel. I am retired Air Force, and I’m very pleased with the opportunity afforded to me to care for my fellow veterans.

What have you learned from your patients?
The thousands of veteran patients who come through our clinic every year are among the most grateful patients I have ever met. These veterans we care for have taught me that we definitely are fulfilling our mission to care for those “who shall have borne the battle” and for their families and survivors.

What are your strengths?
I have had many years of experience in ophthalmology in the Air Force and then private practice in both solo practice and group practice settings. I have a very positive outlook on life and that extends to my medical career. Basically, I believe that what challenges me makes me stronger. Once I have considered the challenge and I commit to meet that challenge head on, I will not walk away from it. Sometimes that involves compromise or “thinking outside the box,” but giving up is not acceptable.

What are you most grateful for?
The challenges that I have faced growing up, a father who provided support and advice and allowed me to make choices rather than dictate his opinions, and a very supportive network of family and friends.
Nature calls for us to heal

By MARY KAY GOMINGER
Community and Public Affairs Service

U.S. Air Force veteran Christopher Bramblett has an appreciation for national parks and public lands that goes back to his youth. Members of his family were National Park and public land supporters, so he grew up hiking, camping, and spending time in the outdoors.

Bramblett’s mom was a seasonal park ranger and a veteran (Air Force), as was his grandfather (WWII, Army). In keeping with family tradition, he served too.

Bramblett served 10 years in the Air Force. Using the GI bill, he started working towards his degree in U.S. history. The transition from military to civilian life wasn’t as smooth as he had hoped, and soon Bramblett found himself in, as he describes it, a “dark place.”

“It’s hard to describe my mental state at that time,” Bramblett said. “I was depressed, unemployed, and not sure what to do with myself. But I knew I had to do something.”

Bramblett was living in Charleston, S.C., at the time. He decided to reach out to the staff at Fort Sumter National Monument and see if they had some volunteer work he could do. They did, and that began his circle back to well-being.

“I always think about the author and environmentalist John Muir and his famous quote: ‘The mountains are calling and I must go.’ That rings so true for me,” Bramblett said. “I can go out in the woods and be the only person around. It’s a spiritual thing for me. Our forefathers had the brilliance to protect the beauty of our public lands, but they also created an escape for us, away from the hassles of everyday life. There is so much healing that goes on when you are alone surrounded by nature.”

As a note, individuals with a life-altering disability are eligible to receive an “America the Beautiful” access pass that gives free access to all Park Service and other public land sites across the country. Active duty military members can also receive a free annual pass. 

https://store.usgs.gov/pass/index.html

Some of Bramblett’s co-workers encouraged him to apply for an internship with the National Park Service. Between the experiences he received in the internship and volunteering, he began applying for jobs in the Park Service and eventually landed a position as a park ranger in New Mexico at Carlsbad Caverns National Park.

He and his wife later moved to Ocean Springs, Miss., when he accepted a position with Gulf Islands National Seashore.

“I love the outdoors, and here we have 160 miles of coastline —from here all the way to Destin, Fla.,” Bramblett said. “We have hiking, kayaking, campgrounds, john boat tours, tours of old forts, and plenty of places to fish. Sometimes we need reminding of the healing powers of nature. I know I did.”

on the cover...
Bramblett and friends enjoy a kayaking outing on a Gulf Islands National Seashore waterway. 
(Photo illustration from courtesy photo.)
Volunteers driving the distance

By MONIQUE GUICE
Community and Public Affairs Service

Can you envision driving across the country multiple times in a year? How about the distance from Los Angeles, Calif., to New York, N.Y., 52 times? Our devoted Disabled American Veterans (DAV) drivers have commuted this amount, from Pensacola, Fla., to the Biloxi, Miss., facility in just a year.

The DAV Transportation Network is a service offered to our veterans with assistance from our volunteers. This helping hand is offered every day to veterans with appointments at the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System.

For one Pensacola VA volunteer, Mark Probandt, it is more than just picking up and dropping off veterans, it is a sense of accomplishment and pride.

Probandt first started volunteering at the Joint Ambulatory Care Center in Pensacola in March 2007. He heard about the driver position from a classmate, when he was in school to become a Medical Record Technician at the Pensacola Community College. He had just moved from Minnesota and didn’t know anyone in the area. He believed volunteering would be an opportunity to socialize and interact with other veterans. Probandt is a veteran; he served 22 years in the U.S. Navy. During his service he served as a Corpsman attached to a Marine unit with specialties as a Medical Record Technician and Respiratory Technician. He has continued to be a DAV driver for 10 years.

“I’ve made a lot of friends through volunteering. It is a very professional team! They are good about covering each other when needed; it’s a sense of cooperation,” Probandt
said. He volunteers twice a month every other week, totaling 25 times per year. Probandt claims there is a dire need for volunteers to fill these positions.

“When I look at the schedule, I recognize there is a shortage, especially when I see there are only five or six drivers...you don’t want to quit on that,” he said. “It is more than just finding something to do to occupy your free time. It’s about serving other veterans and ensuring they get to their medical facility for any treatment they require.”

Probandt also said that the drive is not always the same routine; it sometimes changes when it is needed. For him, the day starts at 6:50 a.m. and he will not return home until 6:00 p.m. “By the end of the day I’ll be pretty tired, but this is just twice a month,” he said.

Veterans are transported from other facilities in Florida and Alabama as well. The DAV transports these veterans with the use of two DAV vans from Biloxi to Harrison, Hancock, Jackson, Greene, Pearl River, Stone and George counties in Mississippi. Veterans are also transported to Pensacola from Panama City, Crestview, Niceville, and the Fort Walton Beach areas. Additionally, DAV drivers operate one van in Mobile, one van in Foley, three vans in Pensacola, one van in Panama City and two vans in the Crestview-Niceville-Ft. Walton area.

According to Robert Davis, Voluntary Services Officer at GCVHCS, statistics for fiscal year 2016 show local DAV drivers from Biloxi transported 1,909 veterans and logged 3,564 hours. The Florida facilities transported 1,117 veterans and logged 3,564 hours. That is a total of 3,026 veterans and 7,245 volunteer hours.

How many miles is that? Well, Biloxi has 68,545 miles recorded and Pensacola has 77,390 miles recorded, which totals a miraculous 145,935 miles!

If you are interested in volunteering or want more information about becoming a DAV driver, contact Robert Davis at (228) 523-5763 or Mike Grey at (850) 912-2057.
VETERANS DAY 2016

Gulf Coast Veterans receive Health for Life
Hundreds of veterans served by the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System had a unique Veterans Day event this year, with appreciation given through the facility’s Health for Life approach.

The Health for Life concept, created by the VHA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, is designed to empower veterans to increase the personalized, proactive health care options each person feels is best suited to improve his or her overall level of wellness. VA’s Health for Life concept is founded through use of complementary integrative health therapies that promote a person’s overall health and well-being along with more traditional approaches to disease and injury management.

“Staff at all GCVHCS facilities had developed their complementary integrative health programs so much over the past few years, and they really felt Veterans Day was a great way to thank veterans for their service and empower them to greater health and well-being,” said Mary K. Gominger, Chief of Community and Public Affairs Service, who oversees GCVHCS’s Patient Centered Care program. “Many of our employees and volunteers take a real interest in this innovative approach to wellness. It isn’t hard to put an event like this together with so many of us having the same goals.”

A special part of the Health for Life Veterans Day program included a Yoga Salute to Veterans. During this event, more than 25 people gathered and performed a basic stretching and flexibility routine and saluted the members of all five military branches. The numbers grew as spectators stopped to watch the demonstration. The yoga demonstration concluded with a Sun Salute to each branch of the military service. As the group dispersed, everyone joined in and sang patriotic songs.

Army veteran Marvin Everest, a volunteer at the Biloxi VA Medical Center and a key organizer of the Health for Life event, said, “The yoga demonstration was much different than what I have experienced at other Veterans Day programs in the past. It was coordinated in a very respectful and dignified way.”

Everest added that yoga introduces benefits like increased flexibility, strength and mindfulness. It even serves as a pain reliever.

“Our intent was for this to remind veterans and staff that 20 veterans commit suicide in the United States every day, and we wanted to bring awareness to that issue,” Everest said.

GCVHCS plans to continue to incorporate health and wellness into all aspects of its daily operations.

“The activities we plan serve as a way we can honor our veterans while at the same time educating them about the many options available to achieve wellness,” Gominger said.
If you’re not a bossy person, now is the time to start. When I walk through the clinics, I routinely ask our veterans, “Who’s in charge of your health care?” Most of the veterans tell me that it’s their doctor. That’s the wrong answer. Taking charge of your health is really a very smart thing to do and you can start today, right where you are, with what you have. No matter what your present state of health is, you can improve something.

Here are seven simple steps to help you:

1. **Get Up!** You can’t take charge of your health lying in bed. You have to get moving! Waking up early improves your quality of sleep. Early risers often have very well-established sleep routines. This means going to bed early, and, most likely, getting up at the same time every day.

2. **Eat Up!** Breakfast really does matter. To get you up and moving, give you a mental edge, keep your weight down and protect your health, breakfast is really the most important meal of the day. Eat breakfast like a king, lunch like a prince and dinner like a pauper!

3. **Dress Up!** Look your best at all times. We can dress for success, and we can dress for health! When you picture yourself at your healthiest and happiest, what do you see? You have to be able to envision your success before you actually see it being realized. Professor Karen Pine from the University of Hertfordshire in England has studied the impact clothing has on what we think about, what we feel, and how we experience ourselves and our lives. A particular bow tie or pair of shoes could transform your life into one of power and could make you feel more confident. Studies revealed that 73 percent of people get dressed up to feel more confident.
4. **Show Up!** Now get out there and make a difference! If you have a job, show up! If you're in school, show up! If you have a doctor's appointment, show up! Whatever you have on your agenda — do it! Social connection or interacting with other people is key to maintaining good health according to Dr. Dean Ornish's book entitled *Reversing Heart Disease*. If you ask Dr. Ornish about the most important part of his program, his answer might surprise you, because he identifies it as interpersonal relationships. Consider every encounter as a divine appointment and look for the blessings everywhere.

5. **Be Fired Up!** Staying motivated might be extremely challenging. It helps to be enthusiastic about making lifestyle changes that will work best for you, improving your energy, balance, health and happiness.

6. **Speak Up!** You know your body better than anyone else. Don’t be afraid to be the **boss of your body** and speak up if you have questions or concerns. If you still don’t understand, ask again. If you still don’t understand, ask someone else. It’s your body and you have a right to know.

7. **Live It Up!** As you take charge of your health you will be empowered and inspired to make healthy choices to improve your health. You will be surprised to learn that many healthy choices to prevent such diseases as diabetes and hypertension can be fun and engaging. Shake it up with exciting dance-fitness workouts like Zumba in the community; or you may choose yoga and tai chi in your clinic.

You can get help implementing the 7 Up’s and take charge of your health by enrolling in the Whole Health class. This nine-week class reviews the Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being model (see diagram).

The Whole Health Equation says:

**Me + Self-Care + Professional Care + Community = Whole Health**

This equation helps providers and veterans consider how all aspects of a veteran’s life contribute to his or her health and healing. The Components of Proactive Health and Well-Being model illustrates how the areas of an individual’s life are connected and how improving one area can benefit all other aspects of a person’s whole health.

For more information regarding the new Whole Health class or other health education opportunities, call (850) 912-2209 or (850) 912-2212.
Serving those who served

By MONIQUE GUICE
Community and Public Affairs Service

Are you looking to fill your extra time or support your community? Are you interested in volunteering your time at VA? There are vacant volunteer positions at all the VA facilities along the Gulf Coast right now.

The Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System is looking for volunteers to fill positions as an ambassador, information desk attendant, or Disabled American Veterans transportation driver. You probably have the skills to effectively accomplish any of these positions. While contributing your skills, you will also acquire new ones. These volunteer jobs consist of direct contact with veterans which could be a rewarding experience. Although these positions aim to assist the veterans, a current volunteer describes the experience as much more.

“The experience can turn into a two-way road,” volunteer Marvin Everest said. Everest is an U.S. Army veteran who volunteers at the Biloxi VA Medical Center five days a week. He works in numerous departments with different duties. He volunteers as an ambassador three times a week and in the chapel twice a week. Additionally, from those positions he had the opportunity to train as a Whole Health Course facilitator. He had previously been a teacher for 16 years; training to be an instructor was something he was very familiar with.

“You can always refresh your skills or obtain new skills, but it’s a different scenario from teaching students to helping patients who come to you in pain,” Everest said.

His years of being an instructor will contribute to the changes that veterans need in the Whole Health Courses.

In addition, while he works in the Biloxi VA Medical Center Chapel he supports the administrators. As an ambassador he helps patients with transportation in wheel chairs, with information, and with directions to clinics.

Volunteering offers the opportunity to form relationships and impact the lives of veterans. Since Everest is a regular volunteer, family members of veterans have gotten to know him. He knows he has made a positive impact on both the veteran and family members, but the connection has transformed his life too.

“The feeling is almost as good as giving a present,” he said.

As most volunteers will attest, there is a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment in getting involved with your community and even more so when you are assisting veterans.

If you are interested in volunteering or would like more information about the duties of these positions, contact Robert Davis, GCVHCS Voluntary Services officer, at (228) 523-5763.

NOTE: GCVHCS has opened a new outpatient clinic in Panama City Beach, Fla. There is a need for information desk attendants for the morning shifts from 7 a.m. to noon, and afternoon shifts from noon to 4:30 p.m. To volunteer in GCVHCS outpatient clinics in Pensacola, Eglin Air Force Base and Panama City Beach, Fla., contact Mike Grey at (850) 912-2057.
Employee finds multiple ways to give back

By MARY KAY GOMINGER, Community and Public Affairs Service

For VA employee Brian Mason, being there for his fellow veterans is not just his job, it is also his passion. Mason, a 10-year Army veteran, by day is a patient advocate at the Gulf Coast Veterans Health Care System. In that role, Mason fields phone calls and visits every day from veterans needing assistance navigating the health care system or helping them understand the benefits available to them through VA. He’s been in this position for the past three years and he takes his role very seriously.

“What inspired me to want this job was the fact that, when I was medically discharged, back in 2007, I had an excellent experience with a patient representative. She was attentive, compassionate and knowledgeable about the process. She answered any questions I had and was able to guide me through the rather stressful process. I shared with her during my last few days in the Army, that her job seemed like a great job to be able to “give back” to veterans, since I was not able to stay in the service. We talked about what her job actually was, and I decided at that point that I would attempt to regain some of my self-confidence by obtaining a similar position in VA. Fast forward to today, and I have been able to make that decision a reality,” Mason said.

“My job as a patient advocate has been very rewarding to me. I can assist veterans every day, each encounter different than the other,” Mason explained. “They can consist of educating a veteran of a process or procedure that they may not understand. I may have a veteran that perceives some portion of their care is going unattended or there might be some equipment or medication they need. Each veteran that comes to me is treated with respect and honesty. If I am unable to assist them, I will involve someone that can. We, as advocates, will involve as many resources as it takes to obtain a positive outcome for the veteran. Having a job that affords me the opportunity to help a veteran get his/her medication that might be lost in the mail, assist in getting that piece of equipment or device that the veteran needs now is a wonderful way for me to “give back” to my fellow veterans. I hope that in some way, each day, I am making a little bit of a difference in the lives of the veterans that visit my office requesting assistance. Probably one of the most rewarding aspects of my job is seeing a veteran that I was able to assist in getting a surgery, that may have been delayed and that they needed to improve their lives, and they are now smiling when I see them again in the clinic. Those small victories are all I need on a daily basis for me to feel good about what I do at the VA. I am looking forward to many more years of service to veterans here at the Gulf Coast VA,” he said.

And if that isn’t enough giving back for one person, Mason takes it steps further. He has also found ways to give back to veterans during his off time. One such activity he has been involved with over the past five years is pet therapy. Armed with four Cavalier King Charles spaniels, Mason visits veterans at the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Gulfport twice a month.

“I don’t know who gets more excited,” Mason said, “my dogs or the veterans waiting in the hallway when we arrive.

“We stay for about two hours, visiting veterans that can’t get out and about around the home. Some are bedridden and spending time with a pet brings a huge smile on their faces. There aren’t many activities you can do that bring out this emotion like a dog can. And my dogs just love the interaction,” he said.

Mason explained that many of the veterans who live at the retirement home had pets throughout their whole lives. Now, they find themselves missing the companionship and joy a pet can bring to a person. During his regular visits, veterans truly enjoy petting the dogs and letting the dogs sit on their laps. It brings a real sense of peace and satisfaction.

With still just a few hours on the weekend left, recently Mason got involved with Team River Runner, a national organization dedicated to creating environments of healthy adventure, recreation and camaraderie for healing active duty, veteran service members and their families through adaptive kayaking. He found a chapter in south Alabama.

“This experience has been both healing for me, and it is giving me the foundation to helping other veterans that are taking part in this group,” Mason said.

“I would suggest any veteran that has a willingness to want to get better and heal to look into joining this group. It’s hard to explain to someone that hasn’t taken part in something like this. But, to be out on the water, regardless of your physical or mental disadvantages, to be able to still enjoy the physical challenge in an environment that is soothing, almost spiritual — that is very healing. To me, it is both humbling and a privilege to be in a kayak or on the water with veterans that might be amputees or have any other physical or mental challenges, and to be with them going through this together… words just don’t do it justice,” Mason said.