

INNOVATION

Returning to the slopes

COMMUNITY

WWII Vets recognized

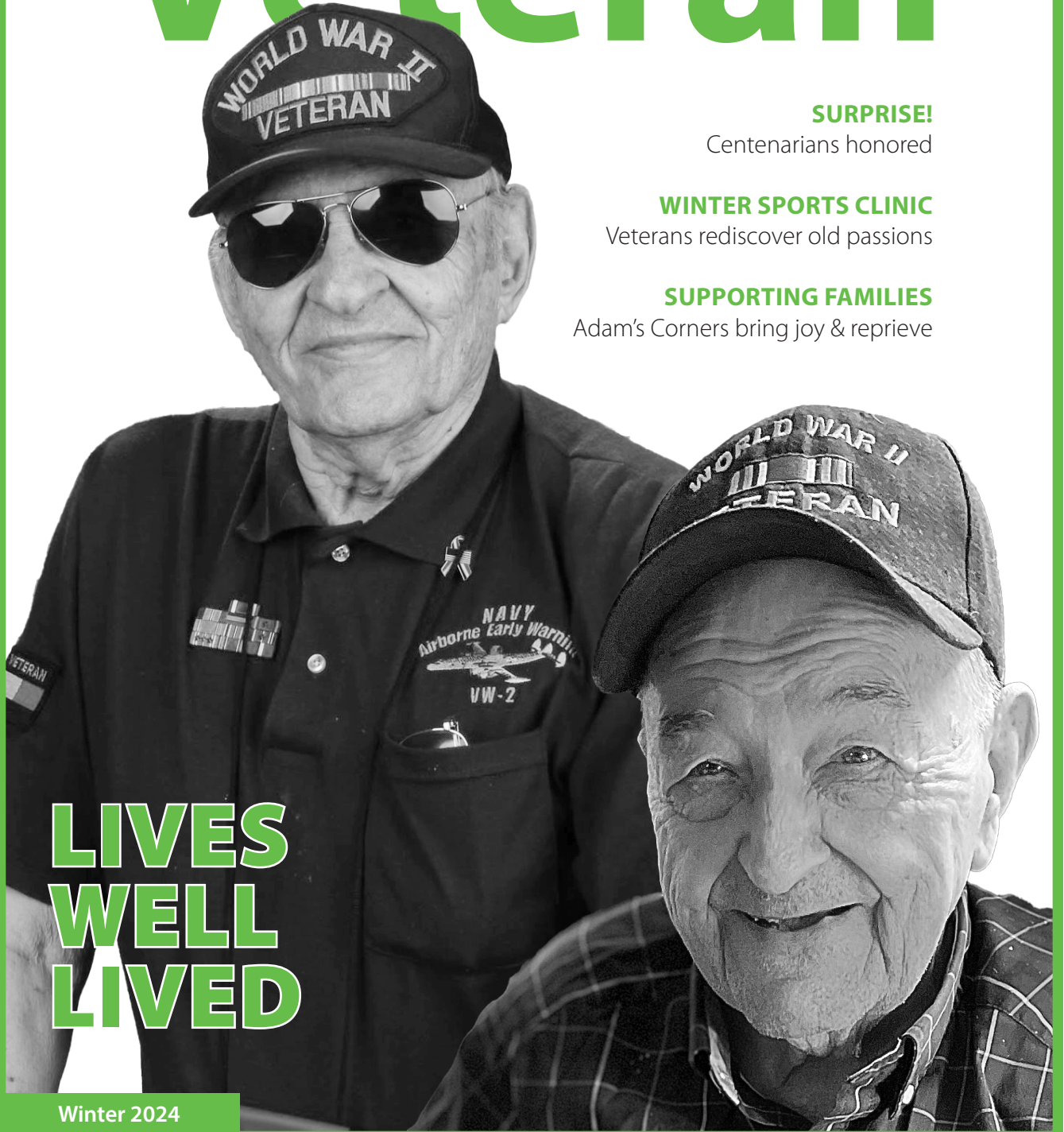
COMMUNITY

VA Secretary visits

SUPPORT

New to Fisher House

New England Veteran



SURPRISE!

Centenarians honored

WINTER SPORTS CLINIC

Veterans rediscover old passions

SUPPORTING FAMILIES

Adam's Corners bring joy & reprieve

**LIVES
WELL
LIVED**

Winter 2024



New England Veteran

VA New England Network Director
Ryan Lilly

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On the Cover: World War II Veterans, Alfred
Pinell and Irving Miller, were both recently
honored for their services to our nation.

Website

www.newengland.va.gov/news

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Message from the Network Director

Dear Veterans,

Another year has come and gone, and what a productive year 2023 was across the VA New England Healthcare Network. I have a lot of great news and stories to share with you in this edition of the New England Veteran. But first, I would like to highlight some big milestones the Department of Veterans Affairs accomplished in 2023.

The Million Veteran Program (MVP) successfully reached its goal of enrolling one million Veterans last year. MVP is a national research program that looks at how genes, lifestyle, military experiences, and exposures affect health and wellness in Veterans. This incredible achievement could not have been possible without the unwavering dedication and support of each and every one of you.

We also celebrated the one-year anniversary of the PACT Act last year in August. During the one-year period since the PACT Act was signed into law in August 2022, the Department of Veterans Affairs received more than 843,000 PACT Act-related claims. More than 133,000 Veterans with PACT Act-related eligibility also enrolled in VA health care since October 1, 2022. In addition, more than 4.1 million Veterans have been screened for toxic exposure-related health conditions.

We hope to continue the great success in 2024 that we had in 2023. In this issue of the New England Veteran, we have some great stories for you. We honor our past by celebrating two New England WWII Veterans – both centenarians! We also have great stories about our annual Winter Adaptive Sports Clinic, a visit from Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough, and much more.

I look forward to connecting with you in 2024.

With thanks for your service,

Ryan Lilly, MPA
Network Director, VA New England Health Care System

WWII centenarian letter of recognition on 80th anniversary

By Lori Flynn, Public Affairs Officer, VA Manchester Healthcare System, Army Veteran

As a young man growing up in Massachusetts, Alfred Pinell's life changed when he received a letter in the mail on March 15, 1943. The letter said his country needs him—and many others—to fight and protect our nation. Within seven days, and just shy of Pinell turning 20, he was drafted into the U.S. Army, Battery B 399th Armored Field Artillery Battalion. He became part of World War II history on June 6, 1944, when he landed on the beaches of Normandy in France.

More than 80 years later, Pinell received another letter regarding his military service. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Denis McDonough prepared a personal letter to recognize his service, honor him, celebrate his 100th birthday, and thank him for being part of the VA.



Pictured left to right: Kevin Forrest, Denise Palumbo, Robert Palumbo, Alfred Pinell (seated), Anthony Parolisi, Susan Parolisi, and Terry Dubois. Photo by PAO Lori Flynn, VA Manchester Healthcare System.

Inside Pinell's home, the American flag is displayed on his wall like a three-pointed hat. It is nestled among photos of loved ones and keepsakes from his life's journey. Manchester VA Medical Center Director Kevin Forrest read the letter aloud to Pinell, who was surrounded by family, including his daughters, Denise and Susan, and his sons-in-law, Robert and Anthony. The letter spoke of the great service that men, like Pinell, have rendered to our nation.

"We are still alive, the country is still going, and we are free," said Pinell, as he reflected on the meaning behind the service and sacrifice of all those who served.

After reading the letter, Forrest said it was not the first time he had met Pinell. "Julie McCabe, a social worker with Manchester VA, and part of Veteran Pinell's case management team, began health care services for him over five years ago. His family invited Julie and me to attend his 100th birthday celebration earlier in the year."

"My dad has received such personal care since the first time I signed him up," said Pinell's daughter, Susan Parolisi. "His case workers are always checking on what he needs and making sure that he never has any issues."

Pinell served a combined 29 years of military service as active duty for the Army, Army Reserves, and Air National Guard.

Lincoln VA Clinic Honors World War II Veteran

By Alez Guerrero, Public Affairs Specialist, TCF Trainee, VA Maine Healthcare System

As time marches on and the end of World War II becomes an even more distant memory, the number of those who not only remember it, but experienced it firsthand, continues to shrink. In fact, the National WWII Museum reports that less than 120,000 of the 16.1 million Americans (less than 1 percent) who served in World War II were still living by the end of 2023.

So, when a World War II Veteran reaches his centennial birthday, it is great cause for celebration and recognition. Naval Veteran Irving Robert Miller celebrated his 100th birthday last December.

To mark the milestone, the Lincoln VA Clinic held a celebration on December 6, 2023. When Irving opened the door following his health care appointment that day in early December, he noticed staff from the clinic were waiting for him.

“They came in and sang ‘Happy Birthday’ to me and they had a cake with my name on it,” he said. “I stood there with my mouth open and I couldn’t believe what was going on.”



Naval Veteran Irving Miller poses with staff from the Lincoln VA Clinic in celebration of his 100th birthday. Irving Miller served from 1941 to 1947.

For Irving, his service to the nation started when he joined the Junior Naval Reserve at only 13 years old. Joining the service was not an impulsive decision for Miller, and is one he's very proud of making.

“When a lot of boys joined the Boy Scouts, in 1936 ... I joined the ‘Junior Naval Reserve,’” he said.

After his father signed him up, Miller joined the Navy in 1941 and described the moment as “wonderful.” He participated in bootcamp in Rhode Island and enjoyed being instructed and following orders.

Arriving in Newport for training, he was excited to start his journey. One of his first memories upon arriving was being lined up, read the Riot Act and marched to a physical to receive shots and a haircut. After three months of drills, gun practice and learning about the Navy, Irving spent time on the USS Constellation, where he slept in hammocks and constantly hit his head on beams in the low ceiling.

Miller was first sent to sea on May 19, 1941 aboard the USS Wyoming BB-32.

"I thought I was given the worst job on the ship: Captain of the Petty Officers Head," Miller said, noting it simply meant the bathroom. "To my surprise, the showers contained fresh water, and I could take a fresh water shower every day."

All the other enlisted seamen on the USS Wyoming were given a bucket of seawater to clean themselves. "You never felt clean [using seawater]," he said.

He went on to serve on 11 ships, fought in nine battles, including an invasion of southern France (earning a Navy Commendation Medal) and Iwo Jima, and served in two squadrons.

"Every time I got transferred to another ship, I had no idea what I was getting into," he said, admitting he didn't want to leave his first job on the USS Wyoming BB-32, simply due to access to a real shower.

While in southern France, Miller was put in charge of directing planes while on a flight deck.

"When we began getting ready to start the invasion of southern France, the Admiral knelt down and said, 'Hey Miller, are we going to get all these planes off in 15 minutes?' I just yelled back, 'What's the extra five minutes for?' The Admiral laughed so hard, I thought he would fall right off of the bridge."

Miller was honorably discharged in January 1947 with the rank of Third-Class Petty Officer at 23-years-old. He was slightly disappointed to be discharged so soon. He had hoped to take the next step and enroll in Officer Candidate School.

"I thought [joining the Navy] was the best thing that ever happened to me," said Miller. "I was full of mischief as a young boy, as most boys are, and I think that the Navy gave my life direction."

After leaving the Navy, he joined Republic Aviation in their experimental department. Later on, he took a position as a manager at a Herman's World of Sporting Goods store.

"As I stuck my head in the door [just to say 'hi' to his nephew, who worked there] there's this lady who's sitting behind the desk. She said to me, 'Are you here for the manager's job?' And I said, 'Yeah.' And for the next 25 years I had the most wonderful job anyone would ever want."

Irving said he never spoke about the war until after his wife passed. He wanted "[people to] know what freedom costs and ... what part [he] played in keeping this country safe." He began writing down his memories and rereading his journals from that time in his life.



Veteran Irving Miller is featured as Plane Director on an old cover from the Naval Aviation News.

"I got to seven pages and I thought, 'That's the whole thing.' And then I called my son [Steven, who at the time had Irving's diaries] in Hawaii and said I've never done this before, but I'd like to send this to you and see if you can make changes and make it sound like something."

Wanting to help spark Irving's memories and elaborate on his stories, Steven returned Irving's diaries, and to this day Irving continues the project.

"I have so many short stories, whether it's the pilots that told me or the captain of the ship [making an] announcement over the speaker or the newspaper on the ship telling it," Irving said, who has dedicated his written works to his children.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough tours VA New England healthcare systems



Navy Veteran Frederick Harris, and resident of the Massachusetts Veterans Home in Chelsea, exchanges gifts with VA Secretary Denis McDonough on Dec. 8, 2023.

By Russ Tippets, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

In November and December 2023, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Denis McDonough visited the VA Providence Healthcare System, VA Manchester Medical Center, and VA Boston Healthcare System to meet with Veterans, facility leadership, and VA staff.

During his visits, he toured hospitals and learned about the various programs and services offered to Veterans living in Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Massachusetts.

Secretary McDonough expressed his appreciation for the work of the VA New England Healthcare Network and praised its efforts to provide high-quality care and support to Veterans. He also highlighted some of the initiatives and achievements of the VA, such as the expansion of telehealth and the implementation of the PACT Act.

During his visits, Secretary McDonough interacted with numerous Veterans and listened to their stories and feedback. He thanked them for their service and sacrifice, both in uniform and out of uniform, and assured them of the VA's ongoing commitment to their well-being.



VA Secretary with Navy Veteran Martin Bodden at the New England Center and Home for Veterans facility in Boston, Mass., on Dec. 9, 2023.

Secretary McDonough also toured the hospitals and observed the facilities and equipment available to Veterans. He visited the emergency department, hemodialysis, the intensive care unit, and the nutrition department.

The visit of Secretary McDonough was an opportunity for the VA New England Healthcare Network to showcase its achievements and discuss its challenges.

Following his visit to Providence in November, VA Secretary Denis McDonough toured VA Manchester Medical Center on Dec. 7, 2023. During the tour, he met with VISN 1 Network Director Ryan Lilly and VA Manchester Medical Center Director Kevin Forrest. He also met with Veterans and VA employees, and recognized several employees for their accomplishments and top-notch performance.

On Dec. 8 and 9, 2023, VA Secretary Denis McDonough visited the Boston Vet Center, Mass. Veteran Home in Chelsea, VA Boston Healthcare System's West Roxbury campus, Rose's Bounty food pantry at Stratford Street United Church, and the New England Center and Home for Veterans. He toured the facilities, met with Veterans, leadership and staff, and recognized the achievements of some VA employees.



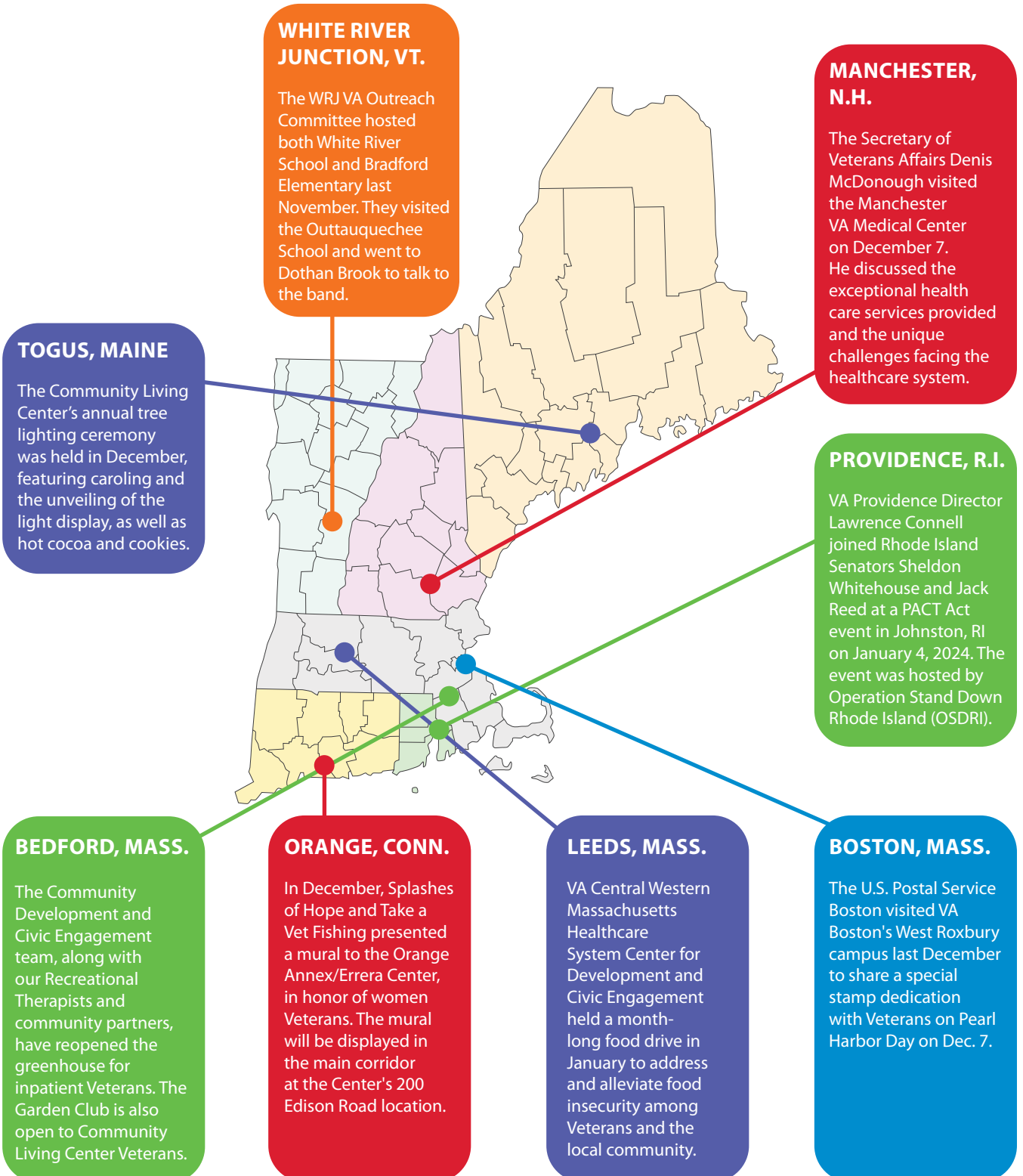
VA Secretary McDonough stops to take a selfie with Information Receptionist Miriam Sanchez.



VISN 1 Network Director Ryan Lilly gives a briefing on VA Manchester Medical Center operations to VA Secretary Denis McDonough on December 7, 2023.

Around NEW ENGLAND

To read about each of these headline stories, visit the VA New England "News" page at www.newengland.va.gov/news



2024 New England Winter Adaptive Sports Clinic

By Russ Tippetts, Senior Editor & Writer, Coast Guard Veteran

Another amazing adaptive sports clinic is in the books! The New England Winter Sports Clinic took place in early January at Mt. Sunapee, New Hampshire. It is the second largest Veteran winter adaptive sports clinic in the nation. It is hosted by VA New England Adaptive Sports and New England Healing Sports Association (NEHSA).

This year, 44 Veterans from throughout New England participated in the 26th annual Adaptive Winter Sports Clinic. Of these participants, 14 were first timers and 14 were female Veterans — both exceeding the clinic's goals.

This event attracts Veterans with disabilities from all over the US with a large contingent hailing from the New England states. The event included 130 volunteers who offered adaptive winter sports lessons and activities at no cost to the Veterans.

Throughout the week, Veterans could participate in:

- Adaptive Skiing & Snowboarding
- Sled Hockey
- Yoga
- Cardio Drumming
- Creative Arts
- Pickleball



Army Veteran John Vacca skis down a slope at Mount Sunapee during the 26th annual Adaptive Winter Sports Clinic. Veterans enrolled in VA health care can get a referral to the adaptive sports programs from their primary care physician.

"My favorite thing about the sports clinic is that, first and foremost, it provided with me an opportunity as a person with limb loss due to cancer to be able to learn how to ski for the first time," said Army Veteran John Vacca.

"The clinic provided me with the opportunity to work with adaptive sports therapists as well as adaptive ski instructors. I put my trust in them and they really came through for me," said Vacca. "The best part of this program is it puts you in a place with a number of other Veterans with different but similar situations and challenges. We all cheer each other on and we have a lot of fun doing it. I recommend this event for all Veterans."

NEHSA was founded in 1972 by a group of Vietnam Veterans who had sustained significant combat injuries. Over the last 51 years, the program has grown into a year-round outdoor sport and recreation nonprofit organization, serving both Veterans and civilians with physical and cognitive disabilities from around New England.

Multiple organizations donated funds to help offset some of the costs for this year's clinic, to include the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks, NEHSA, the New England Disabled American Veterans (DAV) and many others.

Vietnam Army Nurse takes to the mountain after years of setbacks



Vietnam Army Nurse Gayle Smith (center) stands with the New England Healing Sports (NEHSA) volunteers who challenged her and cheered for her during the 2024 New England Winter Sports Clinic in New Hampshire.

By Katherine Tang, Public Affairs Officer, VA WRJ Healthcare System

It's doubtful many 76-year-olds, when given the chance, would say, "I'm relearning how to downhill ski." But for Army Veteran Gayle Smith, that is exactly what she is doing.

Growing up in rural upstate New York, Gayle learned to ski at the age of 10 and was always an active person. Following high school, she pursued a career in nursing. In 1970, after graduating college with a bachelor's in nursing, she was horrified to hear about the conflict in Vietnam.

"I felt a calling to try and help them return home, which is why I volunteered to join the Army Nurses Corps."

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Immediately, Gayle was sent to basic training at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas. After only two months in Texas, she was sent to Vietnam, where she would serve in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital (MASH) for 12 months.

"I provided care to servicemen with a wide variety of medical and surgical problems," said Gayle. "Some had malaria, many had various fevers of unknown origin, but most had multiple gunshot wounds or multiple fragment wounds."

Gayle experienced the highs and lows of being a nurse in the Army, but she says she was extremely lucky as her MASH never took on enemy fire nor was it overrun. She recalls, "My patients in Vietnam would do anything to help me and I would have given my life to help them survive."

After a year in Vietnam, Gayle returned to the States and took a job as ski patrol nurse for the winter in Stowe, Vermont. When the season ended, she used her GI bill educational benefits to attend graduate school at Boston University and after 12 months, graduated with a Master of Nursing. Following graduation, she became a clinical nurse specialist at the White River Junction Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center, where she helped to train nurses.

While working at the White River Junction VA, she met Matt Freidman, MD, PhD. They married and began a family. Gayle started experiencing a variety of symptoms that she would later discover were caused by Addison's Disease.

"I was relieved that I finally found out why I was having all those symptoms," said Gayle. "Management of this disease is tricky at times. I need to judge how much medication I need to take given the circumstances I must deal with on a given day."

Gayle has also experienced many orthopedic issues, which are common with the physical duties of nursing. She also required lumbar spine surgery, which caused her to become sedentary and endure the most pain yet.

In 2022, her physician at White River Junction VA Healthcare System, Dr. Annice Mason recommended she talk to the White River Junction VA Recreation Therapist Jen Stark.

"Annice Mason at the VA told me that with rec therapy, I could get back to skiing. I didn't believe her, but I was willing to try almost anything," said Gayle.

"When Gayle first met with me in 2022, she explained that her family was scared and didn't agree with her trying to pick up skiing again," said Jen Stark. "Her husband supported her because he knew what the benefits of recreation can have on a person's life. They began ski lessons."

Gayle worked both on and off the mountain to regain the strength needed to be a skier again. Dr. Baron Tang Sr., physical therapist at the White River Junction VA recalls, "The persistence and heart she possesses have always been admirable, as is the complete support of her husband, Matt.

It's been a joy of mine to see her get back to skiing as I know that was a major part of her pre-professional life. I'm grateful for our VA team's efforts that coalesced to help her enjoy this part of her life again."

In 2023, Gayle participated in her first New England Winter Sports Clinic (NEWSC), the second largest adaptive winter sports clinic for Veterans in the nation. This clinic is held on Mount Sunapee in New Hampshire.

This year she returned to Mount Sunapee with her husband, who she says has been with her every step of the way. He has supported her both physically and emotionally as they both began skiing again after 30 years.

"Four years ago, I was using a walker or a wheelchair 100 percent of the time," said Gayle. "Now, I use my cane once in a while and am downhill skiing using outrigger ski poles. I am improving every run I take. Next year, I hope to be using my regular ski poles and ski independently. That's progress!"

Gayle and all the NEWSC Veteran participants from all around New England have the common goal of not letting the term "disability" dictate their future. These clinics are made to meet each Veteran at their playing level and help them overcome obstacles with a very specific and customized plan of action for each individual.

New England VETERAN

New addition at Fisher House

By Deirdre Salvas, Public Affairs Specialist, VA Boston Healthcare System, Air Force Veteran

In a touching ceremony held on Nov. 7, 2023, at the West Roxbury VA campus in Massachusetts, the collaborative efforts of VA Boston Healthcare System staff and Comcast's Veteran Network culminated in the ribbon cutting and dedication of Adam's Corner.

The genesis of Adam's Corner lies in the story of Gold Star Mother Cynthia Garcia, a Comcast employee who tragically lost her son while he was serving as an Army combat engineer with the 10th Mountain Division.

In the aftermath of Adam's grave injuries sustained in Iraq in August 2005, Cynthia, her husband Joe, and their daughter Danielle found refuge at a Fisher House in Bethesda, Maryland. The experience highlighted a gap — there was little to engage children during their stay.



VA Boston's Anita Ranade, assistant director (center) and Elizabeth St. Pierre, Fisher House manager (center left) with Barry Bader, vice president for Comcast Business Greater Boston, (center right) and members of Comcast's Veteran Network during a ribbon cutting for Adam's Corner at the West Roxbury VA Campus, Mass., Nov. 7, 2023. VA Boston HCS photo by Deirdre Salvas.

Cynthia proposed the idea of creating a dedicated space. The project was realized through the support of Comcast's Veteran Network.

These corners, maintained by the compassionate efforts of Comcast/NBC Universal employees, are regularly refreshed with new books, puzzles, games and more, ensuring that the spaces remain vibrant and comforting for the families they serve.

The spaces are a testament to the resilience of a mother's love and the community's commitment to supporting those who have sacrificed for their country.

"The generous donation of the Adams' Corner from our friends at Comcast VetNet really exemplifies how special the Veterans community is in supporting and caring for one another, and for the families, a mission they share with VA and with the Fisher House Program," said Elizabeth St. Pierre, Fisher House manager at the West Roxbury VA campus. "It was a great day for our guests and the corner will enhance their experiences for many days to come."