**This is the Autumn 2020 issue of the *BVA Bulletin,* Volume 75, Number 5. The National President of the Blinded Veterans Association is Dr. Thomas Zampieri of Pearland, Texas. Joseph McNeil of Columbus, Georgia, serves as National Vice President. The National Secretary is Daniel Wallace of Martinez, Georgia, and the National Treasurer is Elizabeth Holmes of Midland, Georgia.**

**Serving as District Directors from Districts One through Six are the following: Dennis O’Connell of Long Beach, New York, representing District One; Brian Harris of Homewood, Illinois, now directing the work of District Two; Monaca Gilmore of Rocky Mount, North Carolina, serving District Three; Rae Hail of Deer Park, Washington, serves as the Interim Director of District Four.   
Darryl Goldsmith of Pensacola, Florida, is the Director of District Five, and Kevin Jackson of Austin, Texas, is the Director of District Six.**

**The position of Immediate Past National President remains vacant.**

**Additional appointed officers are: National Chaplain Dr. Ron Lester of Tucson, Arizona. Kennan Horn of Edmond, Oklahoma, is the National Sergeant-at-Arms. Garret Bolks of Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Jeff Mittman of Indianapolis, Indiana, represent BVA on the Trusted Advisory Council.**

**Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary officers are the following: President Sandy Krasnodemski of Allen Park, Michigan; Vice President Edna Kirksey-Dixon of Bay Minette, Alabama; Secretary Sherri Harris-Bates of Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Treasurer Benjamin Holmes from Midland, Georgia.**

**Patricia Hail of Deer Park, Washington, serves as the Auxiliary Reporter and is the author of the *Auxiliary’s View* column for this issue.**

**BVA staff members serving the Association’s membership nationwide consist of Executive Director Donald D. Overton, Jr., and National Service Director for Benefits and Policy James R. Vale, Administrative Director Brigitte Jones. The Membership Coordinator is Maria Ingegneri while the Development Coordinator is Andrea Malmer. Erin McConnell serves as the Government Relations Specialist. The Information Technology Specialist and Webmaster is Cheryl Gajadhar while Laureen Bowles is an Administrative Specialist.**

**The Director of Public Relations is Stuart Nelson with Kylie FitzGerald as the Public Relations Specialist. The editor of this issue of the *Bulletin* is Stuart Nelson with Kylie FitzGerald as the Associate Editor.**

**BVA’s full-time National Veterans Service Resource Center staff members are now Loreal Hamilton and Charles Reynolds.**

**The BVA National Headquarters is located at 1101 King Street, Suite 300, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Each full-time headquarters staff member can be reached by dialing 202-371-8880 or toll free 1-800-669-7079 and by then following prompts that connect the caller to the correct department and employee. Email communication will be forwarded to the appropriate recipient when sent through BVA’s general email address,** [**bva@bva.org**](mailto:bva@bva.org)**.**

**The *BVA Bulletin* is published quarterly by and for all blinded veterans. There is no charge to receive the print version of the publication, which is available upon request of the National Headquarters to any interested individual or organization. Requests for multiple copies will be honored as well. An audio Compact Disk version is mailed to Annual and Life Members upon specific request. The audio version, a PDF replica of the print version, and narrated Word version are all accessible via the BVA website.**

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**The cover of the Autumn 2020 issue of the *BVA Bulletin* is a stunning graphic that portrays a series of dark silhouettes against an orange sky at dusk. The setting sun is bright against cumulus clouds throughout the sky. Beneath the sky are the silhouettes, some of which are either climbing a steep hill or, in the case of two younger children, looking up at the top of the hill from the bottom. The hill and everything below the hill are seen in total black. At the top of the hill is a man helping a younger person up the hill while two other individuals, one in a wheelchair and the other stabilizing the wheelchair from behind, are situated at the top. The youngest child at the bottom and the older gentleman in the wheelchair are each holding small desktop flags that can only be discerned by the outline. Two lines at the top of the poster read: VETERANS DAY, November 11, 2020. Below the silhouettes is white lettering that says: Honoring All Who Served. At the bottom of the page, still printed on the black background, are the logos of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans Day National Committee, as well as the website U-R-L** [**www.va.gov**](http://www.va.gov)**.**

**The cover’s photo caption, located on the next page at the bottom of the list of contents, reads as follows:**

**The Veterans Day National Committee selected the 2020 poster designed by Casey Brown, a Marine Corps veteran from Salt Lake City, Utah, who served in the infantry and was deployed to Iraq. His design was chosen from more than 100 entries submitted to the annual contest. In a year truly like no other, this issue of the *Bulletin* describes BVA’s participation on the National Committee as the Veterans Day host organization. A detailed interpretation of the 2020 poster is part of the “Of Note” section.**

**President’s Page**

by Dr. Thomas Zampieri

**The usual thumbnail head-and-shoulder-length, black and white photo of Tom Zampieri, smiling broadly, accompanies his *President’s Page*. In this photo he is wearing a golf shirt imprinted with the BVA logo. The background provides a light contrast. There is no accompanying caption.**

**The text of the *President’s Page* reads:**

I hope that this issue of the **Bulletin** finds all of you and your families safe and well from COVID-19 as we transition into winter. I strongly encourage everyone to continue wearing masks, washing your hands, and observing social distancing while also limiting exposures of any kind. As is the case with the membership in many Veterans Service Organizations, we are a high-risk population.

We all miss not being able to meet with our fellow BVA members and gather at the usual regional group or Visual Impairment Service Team (VIST) support meetings. Most of us likely feel this void even more poignantly during the holiday season. The BVA Board of Directors encourages the regional groups to hold bi-monthly teleconferences whenever possible to remain engaged with our fellow blinded veterans.

We also encourage you to reach out to your local VIST Coordinator or Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist (BROS) since many have established teleconference support groups with local veterans. A few of the VA Blind Rehabilitation Centers (BRCs) were reopening on a limited basis in September, but the recent spike in COVID-19 cases will result in very limited admissions, if any at all, during the winter and spring months. I do not believe that VIST Coordinators will be able to hold meetings in the medical centers or clinics for at least another six months. We must therefore have the mindset of more teleconference meetings.

Many of the BRCs have developed continuing education support classes that welcome all veterans, regardless of where they live or if they would ever attend a certain BRC in person. BVA gives special recognition to the Gulf Coast BRC in Biloxi, Mississippi for developing one of the first virtual outreach programs covering a variety of topics to keep veterans engaged and connected. Cooking and adaptive technologies are just a couple of examples.

COVID-19 has impacted the direct mail programs of thousands of nonprofit organizations nationwide, including BVA’s. This means that the normal numbers and amounts of donations have fallen somewhat. In response, the Board and staff are both working on several changes—reducing our operating expenses, creating corporate partnerships, and increasing individual donations.

Potential donors appear to have shifted their attention to helping food banks, those with housing needs, and other social support associations, thus making the challenges for the Veterans Service Organizations even more real. Nevertheless, we are working hard to improve our past donor lists, to effectively cross reference the database, and to upgrade our internal paper processes to become more efficient with electronic systems.

I have tasked our Membership and Regional Group Committees to propose updates to various articles of the bylaws. We must devise new provisions that allow for business meetings and voting to be done by teleconference in the future, especially in the event another future convention is ever postponed. Our other committees are holding frequent teleconferences with key staff regarding a variety of these changes that include our membership and regional group structures. I applaud Executive Director Don Overton and our small BVA staff for their efforts to make positive adaptations based on current conditions.

BVA, like our sister veteran and military associations, is facing the challenges of declining membership. As I have discussed in previous **Bulletin** articles, our World War II and Korean War era BVA membership records reveal reductions near 40 percent of what they were just a couple of years ago. From discussions with various regional group leaders and BVA members, the same struggles emerge out of lack of traditional participation at the regional group levels even with teleconferences being authorized. We must ask what happens when our national membership drops below 6,800 or fewer? Can we sustain the association if this trend continues with losses of another 45 percent of our World War II and Korean membership in another two years as projected by VA national demographics on veterans?

Similarly, VA Blind Rehabilitation Service (BRS) reports a decade of continuous declining numbers of legally blinded veterans enrolled in outpatient vision rehabilitation care. VA Central Office is now including, and in the past two months increasing, the numbers of low-vision veterans receiving care through VA Optometry Service.

We congratulate our Government Relations Team for successful advocacy that resulted in the passage of three critical pieces of legislation this year. The last one came within the past month during the lame duck session. Erin McConnell explains that specific bill in more detail in this issue’s **Legislative Update**. We are now working on planning our February or March testimony but recognize that there is a significant chance it will be a virtual testimony this year. For the first time ever, Veterans Service Organizations will very likely not appear in person at a joint House and Senate Committee hearing.

Due to these changes, please check the BVA website frequently for weekly updates. Do not depend only on the quarterly **Bulletins** for information. Our Communications Committee and webmaster Cheryl Gajadhar wish to assist regional groups in improving their communications. Accordingly, they are now working to develop a regional group section on the national site. This will eventually allow all regional groups to update their information more quickly and cost effectively as national headquarters provides that support. We also plan more links to other resources and additional documents for our membership.

This is a time of uncertainty as we continue through the next phases of this pandemic and chart our future direction. Finally, whatever we do, we must do it together with new ways to innovate these changes within BVA to meet the present and future challenges. I sincerely appreciate our BVA National Board members and thank members of our national BVA staff for their commitment and dedication.

**Legislative Update**

by Erin McConnell, Government Relations Specialist

**A shoulder-length thumbnail photo of Erin McConnell accompanies her *Legislative Update*. The photo reveals Erin as a younger-looking lady with light-colored hair, a pronounced smile, and wearing the same button-down shirt worn by other BVA headquarters staff members in the small photos accompanying their written columns. The background of the photo consists of a wooden pillar. In a color photo, the shirts would be blue with the red and blue BVA logo and name appearing on the left breast. In the black and white print version of the *Bulletin* the shirts become a dark gray, but the logo is still clearly visible. There is no photo caption. The text of Erin’s *Update* begins as follows:**

It has been a momentous year for BVA in the 116th Congress. Our final legislative focus was S. 3587, the Department of Veterans Affairs Website Accessibility Act of 2019. This bill was passed by the House of Representatives on November 16. At press time, it was on its way to the White House for a Presidential signing.

With the passage earlier this summer of H.R. 3504, the Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019, and H.R. 4920, the VA Contracting Preference Consistency Act, we successfully advocated for the passage of three bills in 2020 that will notably enhance the lives of blinded and visually impaired veterans, a veritable legislative trifecta.

S. 3587 ensures that VA websites are compliant with Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. It requires that VA report to Congress within 180 days on the accessibility of their websites, web-based applications, files, and kiosks located at VA medical facilities. Once this study is completed, VA will have 90 days to bring a list of the inaccessible websites to Congress and to develop a plan to bring those sites into compliance with Section 508 standards. The VA Secretary will be required to report any barriers to compliance that the Department is experiencing, including barriers related to vacant employment positions.

The bipartisan effort to pass this legislation will undoubtedly improve the experiences of blinded and visually impaired veterans with VA and its webpages. With VA’s push for electronic check-ins and online patient portals, it is vital that these issues be addressed now, especially with implementation of the new Electronic Health Records Modernization system.

The barriers to blinded veteran access to these websites has, in the past, deprived them of crucial information on earned benefits. Our veterans have encountered obstacles to care that other veterans have not had to experience.

We thank Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) for recognizing the need for and introducing this legislation, as well as Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs Chairman Jerry Moran (R-KS) for co-sponsoring it. BVA also thanks Representative Elaine Luria (D-VA-2) for championing the House companion bill, H.R. 1199. We are grateful for the tireless advocacy demonstrated of still others on Capitol Hill who have spoken and voted on behalf of blinded veterans and their families.

COVID-19 made this legislative session an especially tumultuous one overall. We struggled alongside other advocacy groups to adapt to the new world of virtual meetings and hearings. Organizations were unable to meet with Members of Congress and staffers face-to-face, which required us to navigate an ever-changing legislative schedule.

In addition, the intense focus of Congress on the pandemic, the looming elections, and other distractions caused other important pieces of legislation to fall by the wayside.

BVA’s Government Relations team is looking forward to the 117th Congress. We are already compiling a list of legislative priorities for the upcoming year. We look forward to working with new members and staffs on Capitol Hill on issues that will make life better for blinded veterans everywhere.

**Executive Director’s Message to Members**

by Donald D. Overton, Jr.

**A thumbnail photo of Don Overton with a faint smile accompanies his *Executive Director’s Message*. The picture is similar to Erin McConnell’s previously mentioned photo with respect to the BVA shirt and the image background. Again, there is no photo caption. Don’s message is expressed with the following:**

To our valued members, volunteers, staff, friends, and partners:

Another year has swiftly passed, bringing us to the brink of a new year, a year that will bring significant challenges to which we will, no doubt, rise above. This year has offered solid proof that, despite the enormity of the challenges facing us due to the global pandemic, we are resilient and will remain so. I echo what the optimists continue to say: We will get through this.

We hope that you and your family members are healthy and have found ways to persevere and make the most of this time during the pandemic. The holidays will likely look different for all of us this year. However, no matter what, late December will most definitely be a time to feel extra grateful for family and friends, even if we are only connecting virtually.

During this special season, the lives of millions of Americans will be filled with the spirit of giving, the importance of family and friends, and a sense of healing, renewal, and new opportunity. That spirit lives year-round within our Blinded Veterans Association family throughout every corner of the country.

Although it may be a little more difficult this year to keep up with our usual celebrations and traditions, there are some things we can do to take care of ourselves and those we love that are both needed and still very much in keeping with the holiday spirit. Such activities may include additional physical and emotional rest, reflecting on our priorities and what really matters to us, learning some new skill, or sampling a food dish or two totally new to the family.

The holiday season takes on added meaning for all Americans, and none more so than for the men and women who currently serve in the military away from home. We know that holidays are especially tough for their families. Please keep these families in your thoughts and prayers.

To our loyal friends and partners, a huge thank you for contributing to our accomplishments during 2020. Nothing would be possible without you, our community. We rely on our network of dedicated donors, advocates, families, and friends to fuel our progress as an organization and ensure a Happy New Year for the blind and visually impaired veterans we serve. We look forward to continuing and expanding our relationship with you in 2021.

To our members, Board of Directors, regional group leaders, and staff, thank you for being part of this dynamic organization. You are truly inspirational!

So, in keeping with the spirit of the season, I reflect and express my pride and gratitude for those I have the honor and privilege of serving—the people who make the mission and values of the Blinded Veterans Association a reality, our members and their families. I equally express the same pride and sincere gratitude to our loyal volunteers, staff, friends, and partners that sustain us in so many ways. I take this opportunity to wish you and your families a Blessed Festive Season and a prosperous New Year.

May these days be filled with joy, peace, and hope for the New Year! Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!

**Operation Peer Support**

**Monaca Gilmore:**

**Champion of Women Veterans**

by Stuart Nelson

**Two photos accompany this feature on Monaca Gilmore. Both photos reveal the pink BVA shirt that the group of lady hikers wore on the Appalachian Trail back in May of 2019.**

**The first of the two photos, a half-length one, shows Monaca with a sincere broad smile. She appears that she could be laughing. The front of her pink shirt has the BVA name, logo, and motto on the left side of the shirt and the word “LEADER” on the right. She is also wearing a helmet and dark glasses. In her right hand is the grip of a white cane. The caption states:**

**Known in BVA circles for her seriousness and intensity, Monaca Gilmore nevertheless enjoys the relief from stress provided by the outdoors and the adaptive sports for which she has become such a vocal advocate and proponent for blinded veterans, especially those in her Women’s Veteran Group.**

**The second of the two photos depicts Monaca, at an angle but mostly from behind, in descent and attached to a rappelling cord. With her left hand and arm visible she is grasping the line that guides that descent. Her pink shirt from behind says “SUPPORT BLINDED VETERANS” on three different lines followed by a horizontal line across and the BVA website u-r-l below that. Her helmet, plaid tights, and hiking boots are also clearly seen from behind. The background is a rocky cliff that appears almost straight vertical. The caption reads:**

**Pictured here, Monaca Gilmore during the Appalachian Trail rappelling exercise in May 2019. The image is symbolic of Monaca’s recent success in scaling some of life’s most challenging mountains, only to steady herself securely as she descends again to assist others in their climb.**

**The text of this feature on Monaca commences with the following:**

Always giving, intensely passionate, unmistakably direct, caring and concerned, tough loving but never leaving anyone behind or alone, champion of women veterans.

That’s the life and personality of Sgt. Monaca Gilmore, U.S. Army, (Ret.), Director of District 3 and Chairman of the Women’s Veteran Group of BVA.

The Women’s Veteran Committee of BVA that oversees the group now has national recognition, reporting to the VA Veterans Health Administration’s Female Veterans Special Advisory Committee.

Monaca’s life is a unique life, one that consists of the sharing of her knowledge and her means. She generously gives of her time and talents to fill in the gap when something that is needed is not there. She also shares what she knows as she creates ways to lift morale and make life better for the hundreds of blinded and visually impaired veterans she represents, and who have sacrificed so much. She also listens, and she understands.

Born and raised in Chesterfield County, Virginia, Monaca joined the Army in 2000. Soon thereafter, she was placed in training as a Motor Transport Operator 88m, an opportunity that led to an assignment as a Transport Instructor at Fort Dix (New Jersey) after ten weeks of Basic Combat Training and seven weeks of Advanced Individual Training. She spent more than 200 training hours driving vehicles in field training environments. She then trained high-ranking military officials to do the same.

Monaca was deployed to Iraq in 2004 and upon arrival began using her training in escorting convoys. During one convoy in 2005 in which she traveled in the same vehicle with two others, an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) hit the vehicle immediately behind them. The explosion hit with such an impact that the soldier in the vehicle directly hit died moments later in Monaca’s arms as they awaited help.

The explosion took a heavy physical toll on Monaca soon after--migraine headaches, blood pressure medication, and pain relievers were now a part of her life on duty and upon her return to the United States a year later. Her eyesight also started to deteriorate and by 2007 it had noticeably worsened. There was suspicion of optic nerve damage caused by Traumatic Brain Injury, necessitating the implanting of cerebrospinal fluids. She was gradually losing her sight from the same IED attack two years before.

Fast forward eight years and with little remaining vision, things continued to be anything but easy for Monaca. Now divorced and responsible for three school-age daughters, she nevertheless became more determined than ever.

“I remember telling myself many times that I was simply going to do what I had to do to make things work for me and my family,” she said. “Yes, I had to push myself to be independent, but I knew I had to do it because others were dependent on me being independent.”

The fact that she could still hear also made a difference in her thought process. “I figured that if I had my hearing, I could always know what was going on around me and know what needed to be done.”

Soon after her military retirement in 2015, in the midst of many of the most difficult challenges, Monaca was referred by VIST Coordinator Evelyn Heatwole in Richmond, Virginia, to BVA’s Operation Peer Support initiative through Tom Zampieri, at that time Director of District 6, and Danny Wallace, not yet a Board member but one of the initiative’s chief proponents. Monaca became intrigued by Operation Peer Support’s adaptive sports activities, surprised that an avenue existed to run rivers in a kayak, play golf, enjoy tandem cycling, snow ski, hike, and scuba dive, all as a totally blind person and in the company of fellow veterans.

“The ways in which Tom and Danny helped me, and their influence in my life, can’t be emphasized too much,” she said. “Along with my faith, my mental health, and the VA blind rehab programs, they let me know that I could make it as a blind single mother and that I could do all the things I was good at before I lost my vision.”

Monaca also credits Tom and Danny with encouraging her to connect with other women veterans in similar circumstances in whom she could trust for support while also providing support to them. Beyond the support, she began enjoying the camaraderie and the satisfaction she gained from now sharing with others the same resources that had been of so much help to her.

With a focus on women veterans, Monaca now pays forward what Tom and Danny did to help her. Frequently digging out of her own resources, she regularly recognizes accomplished women veterans in her assigned geographical area as well as nationwide. She offers them opportunities to participate in adaptive sports activities and organizes expeditions for them as extreme as hiking a portion of the Appalachian Trail. She is a sought-after motivational speaker and a talented singer, using that talent in singing the National Anthem prior to a Tulsa Drillers minor league baseball game attended by blinded veterans during their 74th National Convention inOklahoma last year.

Monaca’s passion to serve and the creativity she exercises in doing so has not been curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In both of her leadership capacities she has found a way to recognize others during a time many would consider a lull when little can be accomplished and without face-to-face contact.

“Believe it or not, my idea to recognize both a woman veteran of the month nationally and a District 3 member of the month, man or woman, has its roots in COVID-19,” she said. “I wanted to create something that would keep our veterans going and keep their morale up while we are going through all of this.”

In addition to the recognition she provides, Monaca also sends honorees a gift card.

“For me, feeling that I am part of the advocacy process, and that I have done my part in making life better for our blinded veterans, is what it’s all about,” she said. “If we are all willing to be considerate, listening and understanding with an open and sensitive heart and then take action, we can be certain that we’re making a difference for good.”

**Tribute to a Dad and**

**Fellow Blinded Veteran**

by Clyde Jackson

**A photo of an older looking gentleman standing outside what appears to be the front door of a home accompanies this feature. His look is an entirely serious one with eyes directed straight ahead. To his left, the black letters one, zero, and then three have been mounted on a white-painted support column and moving vertically downward, indicating a house number. Attired in dark slacks and a lighter colored shirt, the gentleman is holding a dark support cane in his right hand. His black cap is embroidered with the lettering “World War II Veteran” in yellow. Faint shadows from the sun on an adjacent bush are also part of the photo. The caption states:**

**World War II blinded veteran James Wilson Jackson and father of longtime BVA member Clyde Jackson. The two constitute the only known father-son duo throughout the organization.**

**Clyde’s tribute begins with the following:**

Last August 7 marked the 97th birthday of World War II veteran James Wilson Jackson of the Richmond Chapter of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Group. I have been told that he may not be BVA’s oldest World War II veteran, but he is most certainly among them. I have also been told that we are the only known father-son duo of the organization. Ironically, I joined BVA 24 years before he did but, for the past 17 years, we have shared the same chapter and regional group activities.

Shortly after his birthday this year, I was asked to share a little about this remarkable veteran of World War II via the **BVA Bulletin** with our BVA members throughout the country. I’m pleased to do that now with a focus on the events leading up to his military service. I am equally pleased that it will occur without the passing of any more time than what has already passed since his birthday which, incidentally, is just two days before my birthday. Indeed, the two of us have this and much more in common, including, of course, our military service and vision loss!

At age 13, James Wilson Jackson, the eldest son of what was eventually 15 children in the family, secured his first paying job, that of scrubbing floors for a penny an hour. He would soon join the ranks of newsboys, selling papers on the streets of Richmond, Virginia. Being denied the opportunity to sell papers from the newsstands in the city’s hotels and restaurants did not bother James. In fact, he sold his one-cent papers for three cents to paying customers wherever his instincts and feet took him. The jingle of coins in his pockets at the end of the day was what mattered most.

This African American youngster with special entrepreneurial ability, natural gifts, talents, and a willingness to work hard put him on a path to a lifetime of self-motivation, discipline, integrity, and generosity. These qualities would bring him much personal success and blessings to his family, friends, community, and all who would come to know him.

James’ parents, Ella and Wilson, worked hard to provide the necessities for their family and instill in their children the principles that would equip them to achieve their hopes and dreams. With such a large family, which was not so uncommon for the times, Wilson lacked a formal education. Nevertheless, he was known to be very resourceful.

Ella’s quiet-mannered wisdom and love provided the religious foundation for the family. She made certain that regular meals were served promptly and accompanied by prayers and the recitation of Bible verses. The children were expected to carry out their chores and to share. James’ upbringing naturally gave him a strong sense of family and its importance, which he used in building his own moral and religious foundation.

As the eldest son, James assumed the role of the man of the family upon the death of his father. For that he earned the deepest of respect from younger siblings and younger relatives. Although he was well into manhood himself by that time, there were still brothers and sisters who needed his care and concern.

Education was valued in the Jackson household as a means of getting ahead. James attended George Mason Elementary School and graduated from Maggie L. Walker High School in 1943. History was his favorite subject. Although he was an avid reader, his desire to solve daily needs in the family brought him even greater pleasure. He studied and acquired skills in the areas of tailoring, bricklaying, and many others that he learned by observing and working with others. He continued to sell newspapers until age 19 while also working part-time at Dubley Printing Company on Main Street in Richmond.

In 1943, during the closing years of World War II and at age 19, James was drafted for military service in the U.S. Army. He went through basic training at Fort Meade, Maryland, and was then stationed for eight months at Fort Dix, New Jersey. His overseas tour of duty was spent first in England, then France, and ending in Germany in 1945. Being away from home and facing the uncertainties and challenges of the European Theatre of World War II was anything but easy but he knew how to make the best of trying circumstances.

An Honorable Discharge Certificate for James is dated January 4, 1946. It was issued by the Separation Center at Fort Meade. On April 21 he married Doris Laverne Turner. In subsequent years he found employment at Crookshank Iron Company as he sought to provide for his young family. Staying there for two years would end with the beginning of what he called a life-changing decision to seek employment at the McGuire Hospital in January 1948. Faithfully, he worked as an Orderly for 19 years and as a Technician for 12 years. After 31 years he retired at age 56 and never looked back.

In 2003, James joined me as a member of BVA after gradually losing a considerable amount of his vision due to glaucoma. He has been an active member ever since. Ironically, until the time he joined, he was driving me regularly to and from my assignment at the BVA volunteer office in the McGuire VA Medical Center. He obviously knew from me many things about the organization before he ever became a member himself. When the time arrived for him to join, he was happy to do so. For now, James continues to bring both good humor and joy not only to his chapter and regional group but also to his family and all who know him.

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**You Are Limitless**

by Michael Murphy

**Two photos, all posed shots, have been placed with this narrative. The first of the photos is a picturesque depiction of a younger looking man on the left and a young lady to the right. There is snow on the ground and a backdrop of mountains with snow on the slopes. The lady is dressed warmly from head to foot, but the gentleman is in a short-sleeved knit shirt with only a hat to keep him warm. The sky is mostly blue with a few white cumulus clouds as well. The gentleman is gripping a white cane with his right hand while the woman appears to be holding a dark support cane in her left hand. He has his arm around her waist. The caption states:**

**Michael Murphy and Carrie Pressett take a moment to bask in the September winter wonderland of Crested Butte, Colorado.**

**The second photo, a group photo of four men and one woman all wearing COVID-19-related face coverings, was taken at the foot of an indoor climbing wall. The light-colored, vertical rock cliff is clearly visible. Each of the photo subjects is dressed in sports attire that could be worn on a hike, a fishing trip, or any other outdoor occasion during mid-autumn. Members of the group are standing side by side. The woman is at the far right. The man next to her has his arm around her shoulders. The caption reads:**

**Left to right at the climbing wall, Zach Tidwell, Brian O’Connell, Lonnie Bedwell, Michael Murphy, and Carrie Pressett.**

**The content of the article begins with this:**

My name is Staff Sergeant Michael A. Murphy and I started losing my vision in December of 2018 when I suffered from a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) that triggered a genetic disorder in my optic nerves. I was miserable, depressed, and hopeless—to say the least. I thought my life was over and I was in denial of being a blind man.

Before too long, however, I was introduced to adaptive sports and other resources to help me adapt and live a normal life. These events started to change my life in a way I never imagined.

It has been over a year and a half and I have found some great programs, but this past September at the Adaptive Sports Center in Crested Butte, Colorado I had by far the life-changing experience with the greatest impact.

I was invited by BVA member Lonnie Bedwell to an event called BASH (Blind Adaptive Sports Heroes) and I will be forever grateful for this invitation. Ironically, this was a small group activity organized independently during the pandemic outside of BVA and Operation Peer Support, which made it even more unique. We strictly observed all the protocol in social distancing and sanitation at a time when other organizations would not, for safety reasons, be allowed to put something like this together.

It was one of the first opportunities for me to bring my spouse with me. I truly feel that it was a huge game changer for both of us. We were there with three other blinded veterans and we built the most amazing bond. From the very outset on the first night we arrived, we felt welcomed by everyone, and it felt especially great to have that common thread of being veterans and with vision loss at the same time. It immediately felt like I was normal again and there was no judgment.

One of the most invaluable aspects of the trip was the conversations we had each night after all the amazing daily activities. Sharing our experiences, adversities, and the ways in which we had overcome them was a phenomenal opportunity. It felt like a true brotherhood/sisterhood again. Among the five of us we had a member of each branch of service present. Making it even more significant is the fact that it was the week of September 11.

Amazingly, we had planned on engaging almost exclusively in summer sports. After all, it was still summer, even in Colorado. However, Mother Nature had other ideas and it suddenly felt like winter, both from a temperature standpoint as well as what fell from the sky.

This little adversity, however, did not deter the staff at all and they went high gear into action. They were a truly outstanding group of people who had an amazing passion for the adaptive community and adjusted to all our needs throughout the week. We ended up doing multiple water sports, including a short hike to an awesome-sounding waterfall, the first few days before the snow fell. Yes, it really did snow on us during a summer program in early September!

The next couple of days we were challenged with a state-of-the-art indoor rock wall that felt as real as it gets. The wall got the best of me the first day but, after Lonnie figured out the most challenging section, it was a true motivator for all of us to accomplish our personal goals.

We also did multiple bonding activities and ended up being able to cover much of the hiking terrain in the area. Each staff member and guide that went with us worked extremely well one-on-one with us and had an outstanding knowledge of the area. The final day we conquered a gnarly hike/climb totaling just over five miles. Throughout the hike we stopped at certain milestones, remembering all the sacrifices that have been made by all our brothers and sisters in arms and all the amazing feats we accomplished throughout the week. It was truly remarkable.

This program revealed its value as one of the best adaptive opportunities with which I have come into contact. I encourage all veterans to try out these or similar activities. Feeling that one is limited because of a disability is a terrible myth with which I have struggled. People and places such as what I have described here have changed my life. Do not let yourself sit back while the world moves on. Get out there and crush your goals. You are limitless.

**Around BVA**

**Regional Group, VSOs**

**Unite to Present Flags**

**A photo accompanies this first *Around BVA* entry. It reveals eight people standing together, all with masks and in front of a full-length window to the outside or to a courtyard. A bright sunshine is seen outside the window. Three of the eight persons standing are dressed in formal business attire and the remainder are all in casual clothing. Moving left to right to the fifth and sixth persons in the group, two white canes are present. The third and fourth individuals, dressed in business attire, are together holding up a Braille flag while a gentleman to their left is holding up a plaque. The other individual in business attire is the eighth and final person to the right. The caption reads:**

**Left to right, Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Louisiana State Commander David Devine, local VVA and Combat Vets of Louisiana 6-6 member Michael Rooks, Alexandria VA Health Care System Director Peter Dancy, Community Living Center Nurse Manager Natalie Swafford, regional group vice president William Gordey, regional group secretary Gary Schoelerman, local VVA member Ronnie Mayeaux, and BROS Laurel Miller.**

**The content of this *Bulletin* entry reads as follows:**

The Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group joined with members of other VSOs of Central Louisiana on October 21 to donate a Bronze Braille U.S. Flag and an accompanying plaque to both the Alexandria, Louisiana VA Medical Center and the Veterans Community Living Center.

Present in support of the event were Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 1131, Combat Vets of Louisiana (Chapter 6-6), American Legion Post 3, Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1736, Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS Post 7, and the Central Louisiana Veterans (a representation of all the VSOs in the local area in support of the Alexandria VA Medical Center).

Peter Dancy, Director of the Alexandria VA Health Care System, and Natalie Swafford, Nurse Supervisor of the Community Living Center, gladly accepted the flags and plaques.

The donated flag is a 12 by 13-inch bronze relief flag with raised stars and stripes and the Pledge of Allegiance printed in Braille on the stripes. The accompanying plaque honors the World War II veterans who formed the Blinded Veterans Association on March 28, 1945.

The cross section of American heroes who organized BVA and participated in its early beginnings shaped the history, philosophy, knowledge, and skills of blinded veterans through education and rehabilitation so that they could take their rightful place in the community and create a world built upon equality.

“Our hope is to help BVA get a Braille Flag in every VA facility so that every veteran, despite their disability, can still enjoy and be proud of the flag that they served under,” said Gary Schoelerman, LA/MS Regional Group secretary.

Director Dancy thanked the organizations for the donation on behalf of the more than 1,200 employees of the Alexandria Health Care System. Regional group vice president William Gordey offered thanks from the regional group to the other VSOs for their support in making the donations possible while Gary’s remarks praised VA for its world-class programs to train and rehabilitate veterans who have lost some or all of their sight due to combat or other causes.

Alexandria Blind Rehabilitation Outpatient Specialist Laurel Miller, in turn, thanked BVA for the donation on behalf of BRS and then explained how the six dots of a Braille cell work with a combination of dots representing each letter of the alphabet. She related that Braille has been called the Six Point Star because it shines in the night for many persons who are blind.

“Thank you to all our shining stars, our blinded veterans, and thank you for your shining service to the American people,” she said.

**Proactive Tennessee President**

**Promotes Adaptive Sports**

Tennessee Regional Group president Calvin Poole has now been actively engaged for nearly eight years in helping blinded veterans remain active in the outdoors. He creatively locates resources at his disposal in the Memphis area to make it all possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not stopped him or even slowed him down. His activities to make life better for blinded veterans has been largely unknown to most BVA members outside his regional group, at least until now.

In addition to his BVA position, Calvin is president of the Tri-State Adaptive Sports Association, Inc. (TASA), an organization offering sports activities to disabled veterans residing in the western portion of Tennessee, northern Mississippi, and eastern Arkansas. Calvin is a Navy veteran who served from 1976 until 1982.

TASA organizes a variety of activities, many of which are carried out at a 46-acre complex now called the All Veterans Golf Plex, including a nine-hole golf course previously run by the Memphis Athletic Ministries but which has now been transformed into a unique hangout for veterans and their families.

The site was turned over to the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Chapter 1113 of Memphis in the fall of 2019. Originally the Memphis Defense Depot in its early history, the land is now being renovated to make it more accessible to veterans with special needs, including several blinded and visually impaired veterans of the Tennessee Regional Group and those who are served by the Memphis VA Medical Center. VIST Coordinator Keith Tackett encourages his veterans to participate in TASA activities and actively publicizes them.

In 2013, TASA had a single member--Calvin Poole. There are now more than 40 members.

“We try to reach out to all veterans and their families who can benefit from the things we are doing,” said Calvin. “There are many other activities in addition to golf, and it’s so gratifying to see the change in perspective that happens when we engage ourselves and not just sit around at home, a transformation that happened with me personally.”

Calvin is serious. In the middle of a global pandemic with cases rising in many areas of the country, he helped TASA plan and carry out an Adaptive Sports Day at the complex on October 22 in conjunction with White Cane Day. According to Calvin, the activities all took place using the appropriate social distancing protocols. The protocols included setting up tables with balloons where temperatures were taken. The activities included a tour of the facility and competitions such as corn hole tosses, beanbag tosses, and bocci.

During its early years TASA has also sponsored goalball, tandem cycling, archery, bowling, skiing, fishing activities, and a variety of camps. The group has also coordinated activities with the Challenged Athletes Foundation and the United States Association of Blind Athletes.

**Audio Description Project**

**Seeks Blinded Veterans**

Descripathon, a University of Hawaii-based federally funded research project that includes partnerships with the U.S. National Park Service, the American Council of the Blind (ACB), and Google, is looking for participants from the blinded veteran population for its upcoming virtual events.

Descripathon uses conference calls plus online tools and resources to create an engaging and, in the current culture, a COVID-19 safe learning environment that incorporates gameplay to investigate ideas about media accessibility, especially for persons who are blind, deafblind, and low-vision.

According to Brett Oppegaard, Ph.D., Principal Investigator of the UniDescription Project and Associate Professor in the School of Communications at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, the three-day events focus on producing audio descriptions for the blind from already printed brochures that the public uses at National Park Service sites and Fish and Wildlife Service sites in the United States and Canada.

The efforts of the participants in these events to make the site brochures accessible to all contribute to greater enjoyment of the sites by those who are not able to read and visualize the materials, including the photos and graphics.

During this process, volunteers, all participating from their homes in different parts of the country, join teams of park staff and park volunteers to work on the printed piece together in a small-team environment of 4-6 persons. Extensive training, which includes friendly competition as part of the learning process, is included.

“Although participation in the Descripathon requires a significant commitment of time during three days, about eight hours each day, we’ve seen just how rewarding the experience can be for many of our participants from ACB in the past,” said Dr. Oppegaard.

The brochures for which audio description is produced has visual information about a site’s orientation, cultural importance, and things to do there. The Descripathon groups work on remediating those visual media, such as photos and maps, into audio forms that can be heard on free mobile apps and National Park Service websites.

“Besides the time commitment, the only requirement of BVA members would be a good Internet connection, a Smartphone, and an engaged interest in improving audio description, especially at national parks,” Dr. Oppegaard emphasized. “They do not need to come with any type of educational background or knowledge, and, in the end, we’ve found that participants will have had some great fun, made new friends, refined their understanding of audio description, learned about national parks, and maybe even won a valuable prize or two.”

Blinded veterans interested in participating in upcoming Descripathons should contact Dr. Brett Oppegaard at [**brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu**](mailto:brett.oppegaard@hawaii.edu). Questions and interest can also be directed to Stuart Nelson at BVA National Headquarters, [**snelson@bva.org**](mailto:snelson@bva.org), or 202-371-8880, Ext. 316.

**Gruber, Miller Scholarships**

**Available for 2021-22**

BVA will award seven total higher education scholarships for the 2021-22 academic year, six under the Kathern F. Gruber program umbrella for $2,000 each and one $1,000 scholarship in the name of Thomas H. Miller.

The Gruber scholarship program is now in its 38th year. The Miller program, now in its ninth year, requires the same application process and qualifications as the Gruber awards except for an added emphasis on music and the fine arts. The Scholarship Committee will choose seven total recipients for both awards and two alternates.

            Dependent children, grandchildren, and spouses of blinded veterans, and those of active duty blinded service members of the U.S. Armed Forces are eligible for the scholarships. The veteran must be legally blind and the blindness may be either service connected or nonservice connected. The spouse or parent who qualifies as the blinded veteran does not have to be a BVA member.

Additional­ly, to be eligible for one of the scholarships, an applicant must have been accepted for admission, or already be enrolled, as a full-time student in an accredited institution of higher education, or business, secretarial, or vocational training school.

The scholarships are intended to defray a student's educational expenses, including tuition, books, and other academic fees. Scholarship payments will be made by BVA directly to the educational institution.

             Scholarships will be awarded on a most highly-qualified basis utilizing the following criteria: answers to questions in the application form; transcripts of high school and/or college records; three letters of reference; a 300-word-essay on the applicant's lifetime educational/career goals and aspirations, and past awards and achievements.

Each scholarship is awarded for one year only and the number of scholarships recipients may receive under each program is limited to four.

          Applications for the scholarships may be obtained from [**bva.org**](mailto:bva.org) or by request via email to: [**bjones@bva.org**](mailto:bjones@bva.org) or by calling 202-371-8880.

           To qualify for the 2021-22 academic year, applicants must send completed applications and supporting materials so that they arrive at BVA National Headquarters by **Friday, April 16, 2021**.

Due to time constraints related to processing the applications for the Scholarship Committee's review, applications arriving after the deadline will not be accepted. Incomplete applications will not be submitted to the scholarship committee. It is the responsibility of the applicant to ensure a complete application.

          For more information, please contact Administrative Director Brigitte Jones at 202-371-8880, Ext. 330.

**Feldman Funds**

**Assist Students**

The Blinded Veterans Association Auxiliary (BVAA) will award two $2,000 scholarships and one $1,000 Renee Feldman scholarship for the 2021-22 academic year. The annual scholarships are open to the spouses or children of blinded veterans and membership in BVA is not required.

To be eligible for a Feldman scholarship, the applicant must have been accepted at the school of one’s choice. The institution in question may be a vocational school, community college, college, or university.

The fees for the awards in all cases are paid directly to the school and are intended to defray the cost of tuition, books, and general fees.

The application process for the scholarships includes supplying information about previous academic achievement, a statement of present goals and plans, a 300-word essay, and letters of reference. Completed application packets must be received no later than January 31, 2021.

For details and to request an application, visit [**https://www.nbvaaux.org/educational-benefits-for-veterans.html**](https://www.nbvaaux.org/educational-benefits-for-veterans.html)**,** or contact Scholarship Chairperson Lottie Davisat 703-521-3745 or [**lottie.pete@verizon.net**](mailto:lottie.pete@verizon.net)**.**

**Joanne King Describes**

**Challenges, Joys in Book**

Joanne King, wife of longtime BVA member Terry King, has published an account of their challenging but rewarding life together as a blind couple pursuing educational, career, and family goals.

Terry, who passed away in July 2019, served in a variety of regional group leadership capacities from the time the couple moved from the Chicago area to Florida, while Joanne was an active leader in the Florida Regional Group Auxiliary. He was regional group president for several years at different times.

Joanne and Terry met at the Chicago Lighthouse for the Blind and were married in 1963. The couple had four children.

Joanne outlines the challenges of, first, being blind; second, the additional challenges of being blind and married; and third, the further adversities and uphill climb involved in being blind and married to another blind person. Add to those the additional challenges of raising children without either spouse being able to physically see them.

A resounding theme of the book is that the many challenges of their lives brought with them indelible positive memories and life’s greatest joys.

“You can do anything you want as long as you have the will to do it,” she declares.

One of the activities Joanne and Terry most wanted to pursue, with a will to do so, was boating. The book highlights the challenges involved in going after that goal and their subsequent adventures on the water.

The book is available in print and digital format on Amazon at [**https://amzn.to/3jcsD9m**](https://amzn.to/3jcsD9m).

**Schoelerman Visits**

**New BVA Quarters**

**A photo accompanies this brief *Around BVA* blurb. It is a three-quarter length snapshot of a gentleman with a white cane in his right hand standing exactly in the middle and in front of double glass doors. He is wearing a dark BVA polo shirt with the BVA emblem embroidered on the left breast. His left hand is holding a face covering that he has just removed for the photo. The door on the left displays a shoulder-level graphic of the BVA emblem. The door on the right displays the BVA logo equivalent in terms of size and diversity of color. The caption states:**

**Louisiana/Mississippi Regional Group secretary Gary Schoelerman outside BVA’s Alexandria National Headquarters third floor main entrance.**

**The account of the event reads:**

In October 2019, BVA National Headquarters moved three blocks from its previous location on the third floor of the Fleet Reserve Association building in Alexandria, Virginia to newly renovated space on the third floor of a modern, seven-story condominium complex.

Since the move, only a small handful of BVA members beyond those on the Board of Directors have visited the new digs.

On October 7, Gary Schoelerman and his wife, Marelle, stopped by for a quick tour during a trip to the Washington, DC area on personal business. The couple also treated the Public Relations Team to lunch at a local favorite, Asian Bistro, located on historic King Street three blocks from the office.

**USA Today Spotlights**

**BVA Members**

A **USA Today** Veterans Day special edition, published annually the first week in November, included a feature story in this year’s issue on blinded veterans and their current challenges and opportunities in adjusting to life with vision loss.

  The article, composed by freelance writer Matt Alderton, touches on issues such as recovery, rehabilitation and training, education and career planning, relationships, legislation, technology, and guide dogs.

  BVA Executive Director Donald Overton, former BVA National President David Szumowski (San Diego Regional Group), and BVA member John Todd (Michigan Regional Group) were all interviewed and quoted in the article.

For more information about the article or to obtain a copy, please contact **Stuart Nelson** at BVA National Headquarters, **202-371-8880, Ext. 316**.

**Save Dates for 2021**

**St. Louis Gathering**

**A photo taken at dusk of a 19-story building accompanies this brief entry. The camera is aimed directly at one corner of the building. In some small foreground space are roads surrounding the building. In the background are other tall downtown buildings. Streetlamps as well as decorative lights around the bottom portion of the building have been turned on. Marquees containing the name and the company logo on two different sides of the building slightly below the roof reveal that the building is a Marriott Hotel. The caption reads:**

**Right angle view of Marriott St. Louis Grand Hotel, site of the 2021 BVA National Convention. Photo courtesy of** [**expedia.com**](http://www.expedia.com)**.**

**The full text of the blurb reads:**

Notwithstanding having to cancel a national convention for the first time in 75 years due to COVID-19, plans are still in place to gather at the Marriott St. Louis Grand in downtown St. Louis, Missouri in late summer 2021.

Official dates for the BVA member attendees are August 16-20. Room rates, meeting schedules, exhibit hall information, and other highlights will be shared in the next two issues of the **Bulletin**. Information of immediate importance will be sent via email to regional group officers and uploaded to [**bva.org**](http://www.bva.org).

**Auxiliary’s View**

by Patricia Hail

**Patti Hail’s *Auxiliary’s View* is accompanied in this issue by the previously seen half-length front view photo of Patti. She is dressed in formal business attire and has a small name badge. There is no photo caption.**

**Patti’s column commences with the following:**

**The Path to Advocacy**

Reality is that we all live in a world that is dominated by the sighted. By sheer numbers, the majority of all programs, instructional activities, and entertainment opportunities for the blind are built and run by the sighted. Even leaders of groups for the blind are frequently sighted.

As you have learned, each blinded veteran’s blindness is uniquely different from that of another but many of their experiences are similar or shared. As blind persons become “members” of the community of the blind, their thinking is naturally adjusted from that of a sighted person. However, the manner in which the adjustment occurs is normally quite different for the 80–90 percent whose blindness is age-related (blindness was not in their retirement plan) from those who became blind “in their prime” at a younger age. One of the greatest differences, from one perspective, is the need for independence, to contribute to their families, and to make something of themselves. I would call that need self-advocacy.

Independence means skills experienced and accomplished, a measure of pride, and a can-do attitude. With that kind of a positive accomplishment and attitude, one forms a valid and positive opinion to be used to self-advocate. These experiences tend to grow and expand, leading to the blind individual sharing and having more opportunities to self-advocate. This is the first step in advocacy. Achieving self-advocacy frequently leads to further learning from other resources and sharing with other blinded veterans who possess similar interests and experiences.

Now you have a group with commonalities that bond and can advocate for the entire group. As the group expands, so does the learning; someone has a question, others in the group investigate their various resources, share, and advocate. Then someone from outside the group asks a question or tries to counter an action. In response, there is a ready-made opportunity to express an educated opinion–to first advocate for oneself and the group; and, secondly, to educate the newcomers.

Here is an example of that process:

Someone returning to guide dog school for a new dog after several years “in harness” knows to allow others the benefit and opportunity to learn as much as they can from trainers. If a question is asked that the trainers then refer to a returning student, that student has the opportunity–and the obligation–to answer the question as truthfully and factually as education and experience dictate. This allows for educating others and advocating for guide dogs and the group. Others must be respectful of the answer given in good faith, just as the original question was asked respectfully with the expectation that the answer given would be honest and factual. “In harness” experience is not “opinionated” because the answer is different from what the trainer expects.

The education, experiences, and fact-based opinions that the blinded veteran shares in the pathway to advocacy, which first includes self-advocacy and then group advocacy prior to cause advocacy, are not without their bumps and bruises. Nevertheless, they are very beneficial, both to those who have gained the experience and to those who follow and learn from that experience.

Recommended Reading:

Carroll, Thomas J., **Blindness: What It Is, What It Does, How to Live with It**

Ferguson, Ronald J., **The Blind Need Not Apply: A History of Overcoming Prejudice in the Orientation and Mobility Profession (Critical Concerns of Blindness)**

**Immediately following the *Auxiliary’s View* column is a black and white graphic that occupies a third of a page in the *Bulletin’s* print version. Against a gray background, a large depiction of holly is found in the lower left. From the other three corners of the graphic protrude what appear to be branches that could have been cut from a holiday tree. The graphic has a centered heading that reads:**

**To Blinded Veterans, Their Families, and our Friends**

**A few vertical spaces below and to the right of the center of the heading is the following message:**

**BVA’s National Board of Directors, National Headquarters Staff, and the BVA Auxiliary extend best wishes for a Safe, Healthy, and Peaceful Holiday Season.**

**Veterans Service Program Update**

by James R. Vale

**A thumbnail, shoulder-length photo of Jim Vale in a serious pose accompanies his *Veterans Service Program Update.* Jim is clothed in the standard, previously described long-sleeved dress shirt highlighted by the design of the BVA logo in the front of the shirt just below the left shoulder. There is no photo caption.**

**The content of Jim’s update begins with the following:**

Whom do you call when you are admitted to a non-VA hospital for emergency care?

About two years ago, I found myself with a medical emergency and needed to go to the Emergency Room right away. The nurse on the VA Hotline told me to call 911. When I arrived at the ER, I was quickly triaged, hooked up to an EKG, and had tubes stuck in my arms.

While waiting to see the ER doctor I was greeted by a representative from the private hospital’s billing department and her credit card machine. She wanted me to make a $500 payment. This reminded me of a scene from the famous 1971 movie **The Hospital**. I explained to her that I was a service-connected disabled veteran, and that VA was the sole payer for this visit. I told her that the hospital needed to bill VA, not me.

“What is the group number?” she asked.

“There isn’t a group number,” I replied. “You need to contact the local VA hospital and give them my name and social security number.”

It was as if they had never dealt with a veteran patient before. I did not give in, and she eventually left.

As a veteran’s advocate, I know the importance of notifying VA within 72 hours of my hospital admission, but VA at the time did not make it easy to report my admission. I called my local VA Medical Center. However, the switchboard operator did not know where to transfer me to report my ER admission, nor did a few other departments to which I was transferred.

Eventually, I was transferred to an unlisted extension to leave a voicemail. How would I prove that I left a voicemail? I ended up calling the VA Nurses Helpline but was warned this may not be sufficient. Then I called my Primary Care team and left a message. Still not satisfied, I went to [**VA.gov**](http://www.va.gov) and submitted an Inquiry Routing & Information System (IRIS) inquiry ([**https://iris.custhelp.va.gov/app/ask**](https://iris.custhelp.va.gov/app/ask)) so that I would have an electronic paper trail.

Ironically, I later received a response to contact my local VA to report the admission! I called my local VA hospital back and spoke to an administrative official in the VA ER. Again, how would I prove this? Clearly, there needs to be a better way for veterans to report an emergency hospital admission at non-VA facilities.

I am pleased to report that, effective June 8, 2020, VA now has a toll-free number and an email address we can use to report emergency care. Write this down or have it otherwise available! If you are a veteran with a medical emergency and need to report to VA your ER admission at a non-VA facility, you can call **844-72HRVHA** (844-724-7842), or send an email to [**VHAEmergencyNotification@va.gov**](mailto:VHAEmergencyNotification@va.gov). I recommend that you call **and** send the email.

I do appreciate the support from all those at VA who ended up helping me make the reporting process easier, but this is not the end of the story.

The clerk who originally checked me in at the private hospital’s ER front desk also told me that the hospital did not accept VA.

I asked her, “Do you accept Medicare and Medicaid?”

She replied, “Yes, of course!”

I politely said, “Then, per federal law, you also accept VA.”

Her facial expression was a warning to me for what was coming next. After I was discharged, I promptly called the hospital’s billing department and asked them to bill VA as the sole payer as I am a service-connected disabled veteran and, per Title 38, VA is the sole payer. To my dismay the hospital instead billed my private health insurance as the primary payer and billed VA as the secondary insurance.

Since these claims were not billed correctly, VA denied them…multiple times. After each denial, the hospital billing department representative refused to call VA and told me that I needed to take care of this. I was stuck between the provider and the local VA fee basis office and nothing was getting done.

After about nine months I was put into Collections for the unpaid copays and out-of-pocket expenses. It felt like no one was listening. On top of all that, my Private Health Insurance billing information was shared with the ambulance company, the ER physicians billing office, and the billing department for every doctor and specialist I had seen. All of them ended up billing my PHI and sending me a bill. As you would expect, I was furious!

If you find yourself in a situation similar to mine, try first to take some deep breaths! Then call the VA Office of Community Care (OCC) National Call Center at 877-881-7618. The OCC representative called my providers on my behalf, got me out of collections, and helped me break through a lot of red tape. Most important, that office provided the way for payment of all my related medical bills.

For more information about OCC, visit [**https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/about\_us/contacts.asp**](https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/about_us/contacts.asp) My advice is to use these resources and not give up! Feel free to contact the BVA Veteran Service Program if you need help.

**Immediately following the Veteran Service Program is another shaded box approximately the same size as the holiday greeting. A small black and white photo occupies a third of this box on the far right. The photo reveals a lady wearing a dark blouse and a hat that has the same degree of brightness as the blouse. To her right is a U.S. flag and to her left is a small holiday tree resting on a dark cabinet of furniture. In the background is a large black screen. The text of the box begins with a heading that asks “Did You Know” followed by a question mark. The balance of the text, which occupies a long and full paragraph, reads as follows:**

**BVA members who regularly attend conventions or who have held offices in regional groups have likely met and enjoyed their association with Administrative Director Brigitte Jones. What few may know is that the 2020 holiday season will be, amazingly, her 32nd as a BVA employee. Brigitte joined BVA in August 1989 and has served as its Administrative Director since 2004.** **She has worked for the organization in three locations under five BVA Executive Directors and 16 National Presidents. Her predecessor, John Williams, of Fairfax Station, Virginia, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps, was also her supervisor for 15 years prior to his retirement and her subsequent appointment as Administrative Director.**

**Chaplain’s Corner**

by Ron Lester

**A thumbnail head and shoulders smiling photo of Dr. Lester is located at the beginning of his *Chaplain’s Corner*. The lapel of a gray, plaided sport coat is visible above a colored dress shirt. There is no caption with the photo. Dr. Lester’s column reads:**

What is anticipation? Anticipation is like a woman when she is expecting a baby. She is “anticipating” that baby at any time.

I think anticipation is what I am feeling these days—that something is about to happen after all the time we have been limited from going out and doing the things we were used to doing, like going to church or attending a sports event.

We are told to stay indoors. We are also told that if we *do* go out, we must wear a mask and stay six feet apart. Also, the voice of authority says: “Don’t touch your face and wash your hands.”

I don’t know about *you*, but I am anticipating the day when I can go to church without a mask. I am anticipating a return to better days.

Back when I was in the Air Force (August 1964-August 1968), we were getting ready for Vietnam. I was on the C team. We had sent the A and B teams in October and November. We were told C was going in December and that we needed to get ready to leave. Because of what they told us, we kept anticipating leaving in December! We waited, anticipating leaving any day, but nothing that month.

We thought we would go *any* day after the first of the year and guess what? We waited and waited some more. Several times we were called out to wait for the airplane because it was supposed to come but, guess again, nothing.

I am sure you have heard the old saying: *Hurry up and wait*. And that was what we did.

Finally, on January 21 in ‘66 they called us out to the tarmac and the C-141 was just setting down. The waiting was over. What we had spent so much time anticipating was finally here.

I know many of you have the same kind of experiences. So often, in these circumstances, we pose this question to ourselves, and others: “*What did we learn?”*

The answer goes back to the rabbit and the turtle: *Take it easy and do not get upset*. *This, too, shall pass*.

Yes, veterans and military people are a tough breed of people; we have seen tough times, but we have found that tough times never last. We are the ones others look to during these tough times.

*You* are the rock that others want to be like. *You* encourage others because *you* have been through the mill of hard knocks.

So…keep on believing.

Together, let us keep on believing that we can make it through these tough times and wait, in anticipation, of better days.

A few of those better days are hopefully upon us now with the advent of the holiday season which, for many of us, has also been long anticipated throughout 2020. May we find joy and solace in some meaningful way as we contemplate what blessings and opportunities we still enjoy. These opportunities most surely include the placing of a higher priority on what we can do to make the burdens of others a little less heavy and their outlook a little brighter.

**Caregiver Corner**

**The Realm of Resiliency**

by Diana Hull

Caregivers know what it is like to face adversity. The ability to bend without breaking, to hold steady when a gale-force of stressors threaten stability, to remain curious through confusion and energized by uncertainty–skills needed by every caregiver and found in those with the highest resiliency.

Resiliency is a skill that caregivers can cultivate by finding effective ways of dealing with stressors–the unexpected, unpredictable, and uncomfortable challenges life brings to everybody at one time or another.

Some people seem to cope better than others when difficulty strikes. The resilient are the ones who bounce back early and move on quickly. Optimistic, zestful, and energetic, research has shown how resilient people gain strength and energy from challenging experiences. These are the people who find positive meaning from adversity.

In its narrowest definition, resiliency can be viewed as the successful adaptation to change with the ability to competently function through stressful experiences. For those who are the most resilient, research recognizes that successful adaptation to change is the broad outcome of one very specific quality.

Is this quality the luck of a particular personality? Or is there a technique for protecting ourselves from the psychological and physical health risks of stress?

Research shows that resilient people are not immune to the effects of stress. They do experience reactions such as anxiety and fear. But, compared to those with low resiliency, the degree of reactivity is less and the presence of positive emotion is greater in people with the highest resiliency.

Rather than resisting or bolting, resilient people face fear, lean into the unknown and traverse discord, transforming the energy of arousal–fight or flight–into strong psychological resources that promote adaptation.

The one particular trait common among the most resilient has therefore been identified: Resilient people harness the capacity to utilize the powerful force of positive thinking.

Positive emotion has the effect of broadening thinking and increases coping skills. A positive outlook heightens the ability to find value, purpose, and meaning in challenging events, thus enhancing states of well-being.

Caregivers who maintain positive thoughts in the face of struggle help the mind seek positive solutions to difficult problems.

Psychological research has shown that people are not “gifted” with resiliency. Resiliency is a learned skill that is developed and strengthened with practice. A sense of humor helps, but relaxation and meditation techniques have been shown to improve positive thinking and can proactively build resiliency reserves.

Meditation and relaxation offer effective techniques to train the mind to settle into the positive. By flipping our thoughts, speech, and actions positively, we not only heighten resiliency but deepen understanding and insight.

To proactively prepare for the next challenging circumstance that is certain to come, begin a practice that encompasses regular deep-relaxation or meditation techniques. And the next time adversity strikes, take the following steps toward resiliency:

* Maintain a connection with others–find trusted listeners who will provide honest feedback.
* Observe and name what you are experiencing at this moment.
* Identify your own strengths–use your energy to promote positive influence.
* Accept change as an opportunity to create something new.
* Recognize the positive in every situation–think, speak, and act from the positive

position.

Thinking, speaking, and acting from the positive perspective will take commitment and practice. Eventually the payoff arrives in broader awareness, strengthened self-confidence, and a greater capacity to successfully traverse difficulty. For caregivers, the greatest benefit becomes the ability to find the positive and to step into the realm of the highly resilient.

**Diana Hull practices community medicine as a Physician Assistant. She also supports her mother as a care-partner through ten years of developing Alzheimer’s disease. She practices and teaches mindfulness yoga. Diana writes extensively about Alzheimer’s care and has led support groups for family caregivers. Printed with permission of Gary Barg, caregiver.com in recognition of National Family Caregivers Month.**

**Of Note**

**VA Describes**

**Winning Design**

Shortly after revealing the 2020 Veterans Day poster design, used as this issue’s **Bulletin** cover, VA uploaded a description and interpretation of the stunning image.

The black color of the silhouettes in the graphic represents the stoic and enduring nature of veteran service. The contrast between the bright background and the dark images represent the sharp contrast that most veterans experience between military and civilian life. The sharp contrast fits this year’s 2020 theme **Vision: Veterans in Focus**.

The beautiful sky represents the serenity that veterans seek in their sacrifices for peace in drowning out the echoes of war.

The cliff, veterans, and children represent the legacy of veterans. The children represent future veterans. Those struggling on the hill represent incoming and current veterans. Those at the top of the hill represent the older generation looking after the others. Some veterans on the hill are turning back to assist others. This represents the mindset of veterans always looking back to help other generations, leaving a legacy better than they found it. Visitors to a VA Medical Center find that veterans are always welcoming and helping in a variety of ways, an example of the looking back.

The mountain represents experience; the climbers appear to climb for the better view atop the mountain.

BVA National Headquarters has a limited supply of posters that can be shared with Association members. Please contact Stuart Nelson at [**snelson@bva.org**](mailto:snelson@bva.org) or 202-371-8880, Ext 316 if you would like a poster sent to you.

**Inspirational SKY BLOSSOM**

**Debuts on Veterans Day**

An energizing documentary film about caregivers made by caregivers tells the story of teen and 20-something care heroes who often step forward for disabled or chronically ill military family members.

**SKY BLOSSOM: Diaries of the Next Greatest Generation** premiered on November 11 in honor of Veterans Day and National Family Caregivers Month. The passion project, directed by award-winning MSNBC anchor Richard Lui, included Emmy-nominated filmmaker Jean Tsien and Emmy-nominated actor David Hyde Pearce.

**SKY BLOSSOM** salutes the frontline heroes who care for loved ones at home, particularly during an unexpected year 2020. It is an uplifting window into the lives of 24.5 million children and millennials who do things often seen only in hospitals and who quietly double as cheerleaders, kids with part-time jobs, high school athletes, or stellar students.

“This film shares a journey with five extraordinary families from different parts of the country whose bravery, self-sacrifice, devotion, and love are an inspiration,” said Lui. “Our hope is that the film honors and empowers the millions of family caregivers across our nation—whose numbers are rapidly growing in the pandemic.”

The film’s title, said Tsien, is from World War II when troops would look up at the sky and say “Here come the Sky Blossoms” to describe the paratroopers rushing to their aid. The film reveals a new generation answering that same call to help in only a slightly different way.

AARP, Alzheimer’s Association, EMD Serono, Seniorlink, and the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation sponsored the production in cooperation with the Elizabeth Dole Foundation.

To learn more about the film and how it can be viewed, visit [**www.skyblossom.org**](http://www.skyblossom.org).

**Plans in Place at VA**

**For Vaccine Distribution**

VA announced on November 17 that the Department would be ready to distribute an authorized COVID-19 vaccine as soon as it arrives.

The plan will be a phased approach with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other federal partners based on scientific and historical evidence, lessons learned from past pandemic vaccine plans, and input from scientific experts both within and outside VA.

“In October, staff at VA medical facilities conducted important planning exercises in preparation for the vaccine,” said Secretary Wilkie. “These exercises help us to address vaccine distribution, allocation, safety monitoring and supply tracking.”

COVID-19 vaccine implementation will include an initial limited-supply phase followed by a general implementation phase when large supplies of the vaccine will be available to veterans who want to receive one.

The announcement followed the mid-November reports from drugmakers Pfizer and Moderna that their vaccines had success rates between 90 and 95 percent although authorization by the Food and Drug Administration, necessary for mass distribution, had not yet been granted at **Bulletin** press time.

**Women at VA Recognized**

**For Notable Achievements**

VA recently honored 13 women employees for guiding, mentoring, and driving their industry through impactful leadership.

The recipients of the 2020 “G2Xchange Leading for Impact, Women in Leadership Award” were announced October 26.

Secretary Wilkie referred to the honorees as a force in effectively communicating and implementing VA’s mission while at the helm in their positions. He said that they were integral to the successes in all facets of the many programs and operations benefitting the health and well-being of America’s veterans.

“VA supports women and women veterans serving at all levels of the Department,” he stated. “Women employees and their leadership at VA are positively impacting the care and services veterans receive each day in such areas as benefits, customer experience, health, innovation, technology, and small business.”

**VA Touts Favorable Report**

**Highlighting IT Innovation**

VA’s Office of Information and Technology (OIT) has released its multi-media 2020 Year in Review, “Driving Digital Transformation at VA.”

The report highlights VA’s innovative information technology initiatives that the agency believes has dramatically improved veterans’ access to the benefits and services they have earned.

It asserts that major investments in digital and IT transformation of VA’s chief data systems and service-delivery platforms provided a solid foundation for OIT’s quick pivot to COVID-19 mobilization, including the shifting of more than 415,000 staff and contractor personnel to telework and expanding telehealth access at VA Medical Centers nationwide.

“By ensuring that VA employees have the tools and technology they need to do their jobs—no matter where they are or what situation they’re in—our nation’s veterans continue to have access to the care they need and deserve,” said Secretary Wilkie. “The 2020 Year in Review offers real-time examples to veterans and taxpayers of the important benefits of federal modernization efforts, highlighting the results and the achievements we’ve made as an organization so far in 2020.”

**Wayfinding Researcher**

**Seeks Assistance**

Second-year information design doctoral student Yuan Yuan of the University of Leeds, United Kingdom, is seeking volunteer participants from visually impaired individuals with a personal computer or Smartphone who could complete a brief questionnaire prior to the end of 2020.

Yuan contacted BVA in mid-November to request the assistance. Specifically, Yuan and the university’s School of Design is gathering opinions regarding the needs of those with sight loss on the effectiveness of English-language wayfinding signage design in an academic setting. The research intends to enhance the inclusivity and accessibility of wayfinding signages in the university environment for visually impaired users.

“All participants with any type of sight loss condition are eligible to take part in this research,” he said. “Ideally, we are looking for sight loss individuals with enough residual vision to be able to read wayfinding signages.”

Yuan has reached out to the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB, United Kingdom) and the Canadian National Institute for the Blind (CNIB) for assistance but still needs some additional responses to conclude his findings.

“I would truly appreciate it if some blinded veterans could help,” he said. “It will be my pleasure to acknowledge your support in my future thesis and publication.”

For more information or to participate, please visit [**https://leeds.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/academic-setting-wayfinding-signage-inclusivity-survey-202-3**](https://leeds.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/academic-setting-wayfinding-signage-inclusivity-survey-202-3) or contact Yuan directly at [**sd17yy@leeds.ac.uk**](mailto:sd17yy@leeds.ac.uk).

**IRS Offers Accessible**

**Information and Resources**

As tax season approaches the Alternative Media Center (AMC) of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) provides a variety of resources and accessibility services to taxpayers with disabilities.

Tax-related content is available in several formats for use with assistive technology such as screen reading software, refreshable Braille displays, and voice recognition software.

Hundreds of tax forms and publications can be viewed or downloaded in alternative formats, including text-only, Braille ready files, browser-friendly HTML, accessible PDF, and large print PDF.

Blinded veterans who need an alternative tax product can download it from the Accessible Forms and Publications page, [**https://www.irs.gov/forms-pubs/accessible-irs-tax-products**](https://www.irs.gov/forms-pubs/accessible-irs-tax-products).

They can also request large print copies by calling the IRS at 800-829-3676. Another option is to first access a comprehensive listing of IRS resources and information at [**https://go.usa.gov/x7UUC**](https://go.usa.gov/x7UUC).

**Letters to the Editor**

**A Call to Guide Dog Users**

The BVA Dog Handlers Committee would like to hear your guide dog story. We believe that guide dogs offer a measure of independence unequaled by any other means of mobility or accommodation. Your story may be about your current guide dog or a previous one – or maybe you have several stories to share.

Yes, pictures are always fun – and BVA has the best picture descriptor. BVA National would also like to open the BVA website to short stories submitted by BVA dog handlers or their immediate family members. Also welcome are stories about training programs that relate success or anecdotes about how their experience in training improved their path to independence. We would like to have as many stories as you have – one at a time, please – now and along the way as you have an opportunity. **So, Just Do It!**

We hope to share your stories with others who are considering training with a guide or service dog. Not all stories will fit into the **Bulletin**, so be sure to submit your stories to [**snelson@bva.org**](mailto:snelson@bva.org) and send a copy to the Dog Handlers Committee at [**cvgsdh@accesscat.com**](mailto:cvgsdh@accesscat.com) so that they can be included on our website.

**Rae Hail**

**Deer Park, Washington Interim Director of District 4**

**In Remembrance**

**A photo from Arlington National Cemetery accompanies this issue’s *In Remembrance* section. It reveals two raincoat-attired gentlemen turned toward one another but not entirely face to face. They are a few feet from each other. Behind each and several feet away are the spouses who, for the most part, are blocked out of the photo by their husbands. The man on the left is wearing a service cap that says “Executive Director” while the other gentleman has this year’s Veterans Day National Committee pin fastened to his raincoat lapel. Although the two men appear to be interacting, the face coverings they are wearing make it impossible to confirm that assumption. A green awning visible behind and above them appears to form a tall, spacious tent that is preventing them from becoming wet.**

**The caption states:**

**Several minutes still ahead of the arrival of President Trump’s party, Donald Overton, Secretary Robert Wilkie, and spouses Peggy and Julia find refuge from a heavy rain at Arlington Cemetery on Veterans Day.**

**The Blinded Veterans Association deeply regrets the deaths of the following blinded veterans.**

**From the Arkansas Razorback Regional Group:**

William Boothman

**Cape Cod and Islands Regional Group:**

Marie Haynes

**Florida Group:**

William Blanchard

John Boyce

James Duda

Allan Duffin

John Findley

Russell Gustafson

Wallace Harrelson

Marion Harris

George Hovan

Robert Jelen

Kenneth Johnson

Ronald Jones

Wilbur Jordan

Robert Kearse

Jeff Lazerri

Jack Leonhardt

Stanley Levy

Phoenix Link

Joseph Mahal

Robert McCarthy

Jack McCoy

Robert McLaughlin

Donald Mitchell

Samuel Perpetuo

LeRoy Porter

Earl Ray Proctor

Heinz Ratsch

Herbert Rubottom

John Rummel

James Solomons

Daniel Stoup

Walter Turton

Ronald Wells

Mike Zawinsky

Herbert Zimmer

**Gem State Group:**

Norm Addington

**Georgia Regional Group:**

Tommie Brown

Douglas Raulerson

**Greater Houston R.G.**

Charles Richardson

**Heartland Group:**

Eugene Talbott

**Illinois Group:**

Ronald Cooper

Daniel Rupp

**From the Indiana Regional Group:**

John Myers

**Michigan:**

Ed Ratzenberger

**Mid-Atlantic Group:**

Kenneth Lovern

William Spiers

Calvin Street

**New Hampshire:**

Roger Tousignant

**Ohio:**

Everett Oglesbee

**Pennsylvania:**

Wallace Conner

**Puerto Rico:**

Dionisio Rosaly Antonetty

Felipe Arroyo

Julio Rengel Ramos

**From the Rhode Island-Southeast Massachusetts Regional Group:**

Allan Manuel

Jerome McKinney

**Rio Grande Group:**

Thelma Clay

**Rocky Mountain Regional Group:**

John Lane

Richard Severini

**San Diego Group:**

Marty Broden

David Harmer

**Sooner Regional Group:**

Charles Harris

**South Carolina:**

John Beauford

**South Texas:**

Thomas Fox

**Southern California:**

Robert Hamilton

Willie Sanders

**Washington:**

Burnett Thompson

**Western Mountaineer Regional Group:**

Erlend Frederickson

**Wisconsin Group:**

James Barrett

Milferd Behnke

Thaddeus Niebojewski

**And, lastly, the group of at-large BVA Members with no regional group affiliation:**

Helen Boiko

Alice W. Damp

Frederick Ferguson

Cyril Fail

Richard Gage

Benjamin F. Hodges

William King

William Lightner

Albert Little

James McCray

Maynard Moore

Ralph Parkinson

Patricia Petrasovits

Arthur Poncheri

Laura Sowells

Floyd Stahl

Sumiko Suyenaga

Richard G. Trollope

Jacqueline Tucker

Alan Will

**Final Thought**

**The Autumn 2020 *BVA Bulletin* concludes with an action photo of a group of formally dressed individuals walking on a wet sidewalk with fallen leaves, three in a group in front and four behind them. The front group includes Donald Overton his wife, Peggy, and another man. The group in back includes VA Secretary Wilkie and his wife, Julia, who is holding an umbrella for both herself and her husband. The remaining individuals appear to be security detail for the group as they walk to the side. All in the photo are wearing masks. In the photo’s background are trees with a few remaining brown leaves and the cemetery’s amphitheater slightly farther back. The *Final Thought* is expressed as follows:**

In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed a bill proclaiming November 11 as Veterans Day and called upon Americans everywhere to rededicate themselves to the cause of peace. The name of the holiday replaced Armistice Day.

He also issued a presidential order directing the head of what was then the Veterans Administration to form a Veterans Day National Committee to organize and oversee the national observance of Veterans Day each year.

Representing BVA as the National Committee’s host organization for 2020, Donald Overton and his wife, Peggy, pictured here in front, braved the late autumn moisture to officially welcome both VA Secretary Wilkie and later President Donald Trump to the ceremonial presidential wreath-laying at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

**This concludes the email Microsoft Word version of the Autumn 2020 *BVA Bulletin*.**