SUMMER 2013

Voice of the Veteran

VA GREATER LOS ANGELES HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

★ PREMIERE ISSUE ★

By Veterans, for Veterans

Voice of the Veteran

Summer 2013

The Official Veterans Newsletter of the VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

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Produced by the Office of the Patient Experience Voice of the Veteran Program

Editor's Notes: We hope you enjoy our first issue of *Voice of the Veteran*, which compiles material from the summer season through October 2013.

This quarterly newsletter is an authorized publication for GLA patients and their families, dedicated to supporting the holistic wellness and health promotion hallmarks of Patient Centered Care.

Contents of *Voice of the Veteran* are not necessarily the official views of, or endorsed by, The U.S. Government, Department of Defense, or the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Office of the *Voice of the Veteran* collects and provides the editorial guidance for content. *Voice of the Veteran* staff and Patient Advisory Council member reporters collect submissions and photographs, unless otherwise indicated. Veteran or employee submissions may be edited.

Do you want to share newsworthy articles, letters, or story ideas about Patient Centered Care with GLA Veterans? If so, please feel free to email Marianne at: ***Marianne.davis@va.gov***

Welcome

to the first edition of the *Voice of the Veteran*, a magazine designed for our Veterans, by our Veterans. The VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System (GLA) aims to provide all our Veterans with patient centered care, which means your health care is centered around you—your needs, concerns, and goals. The *Voice of the Veteran* reflects that idea, providing information on health care issues that are important to you. Here you will find articles that are contributed by your fellow Veterans, an editorial board that includes Veterans, and material that is the result of your ideas and suggestions.

"The *Voice of the Veteran* is your magazine, devoted to your health and well-being..."

Our goal with these articles is to provide information about services at GLA that may be of interest to you, highlight real life stories of how these services have helped your fellow Veterans, and give you contact information to find out more if you wish. The contributors are from our Patient Advisory Councils, staff who are Veterans, and volunteers who are dedicated to serving Veterans. The *Voice of the Veteran* is your magazine, devoted to your health and well-being, and we look forward to more ideas and suggestions from you.

Please enjoy the *Voice of the Veteran*. Let's practice wellness and healthy living together, every day. Thank you for serving our country, and allowing us to now serve you. □

Donna M. Beiker

Director
VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System

Patient Advisory Councils: Hard at Work

Veterans not only receive health care at GLA, they also are a critical part of improving the services GLA provides. One of the ways that your fellow Veterans do that is by participating in a Council of patients who meet regularly and work on projects. At GLA's Sepulveda, West LA, and Downtown LA locations, these Patient Advisory Councils (PAC) have been hard at work with some great results.

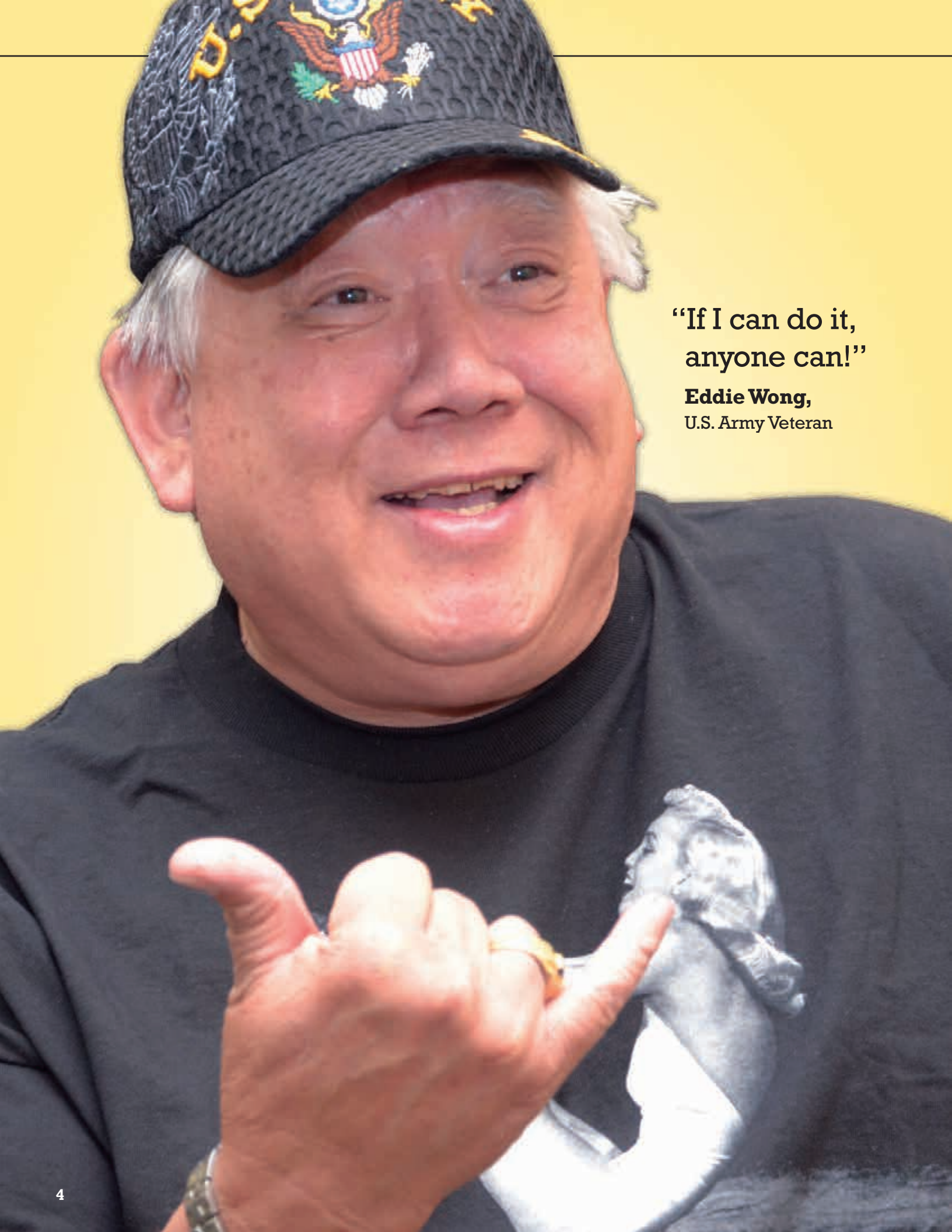
For example, the PAC at Sepulveda really wanted to make the billing process clearer for their fellow patients. They worked with VA staff in many departments for two years, and created the "Money Matters" pamphlet, which simplifies issues such as billing, insurance, eligibility, and other topics. The pamphlet is available in the Patient Education Resource Centers (PERCs) and at Voluntary Service offices. The Sepulveda PAC also helped create the New Patient Orientation class.

The PAC at West LA was interested in helping staff the Concierge Program on each floor in Building 500. The program started out with volunteers and now has employees as well, and has been expanded to include a lot of information and services. Now they are getting ready to help with a West LA New Patient Orientation class.

The PAC at Downtown LA was interested in providing more information to our patients about colonoscopies. They spoke with medical experts about the procedure and learned that it is safe, painless and can be life-saving. Through the PAC's work in gathering information, they found patients who were so satisfied with their colonoscopy experiences that they volunteered to talk with other patients if they were worried about the procedure. This is a great example of what the PACs provide—Vets helping Vets!

These are just some of the accomplishments of our PACs, who work hard for Veterans. But we would love to have new members in our PACs and establish PACs at our other sites. □

If you have ideas for improving the GLA health care system and being part of the solution, **call Marianne Davis at (310) 268-3534, or e-mail her at marianne.davis@va.gov.**



"If I can do it, anyone can!"

Eddie Wong,
U.S. Army Veteran

MOVE-ing out!

No stranger to challenge, and after many years working in the entertainment industry arranging stunts and props, Eddie Wong knows how to work around a problem. But when it came to his own health, he needed a little leg-up.

Diabetes, emphysema, and having to be in a wheelchair to get around made it hard to "be a player." Weight problems made it hard to sleep and move; even getting around the house was getting hard. Then Eddie got into the MOVE Program.

"I got moving again, watched my diet, and started to shed some of the weight."

He felt good enough to try out for the Golden Age Games…and came home with medals, to his great surprise! His clinical team supported his effort, and they were the first ones who got to see his awards. "My health care team has always been 100% behind me," he says, and encourages him to try new things. He is now preparing to compete again in swimming, chair ping pong, and other events.

"If I can do it, anyone can!" Eddie beams. He has been working hard at getting fit to be in shape for the competition. He also participates in almost every seasonal event, party, outing, and performance at the VA—he doesn't want to miss a thing in life.

Another important motivation is Eddie's daughter. While she doesn't live with him, he wants to be be a good dad and help take care of her for many more years. "I'm getting in shape for her, too," Eddie says proudly. Eddie Wong has goals, and VA is here to help him reach them. What about your goals? □

For more information about **MOVE, call Aaron Flores at (310) 478-3711 ext. 44697.** And for more information about competing at the **VA National Games, call Ramona Spiller at (310) 268-3934.**

The VA Saved My Life: A Woman Veteran's Journey

Teryl was a Military Police officer in the U.S. Marine Corps from 1979 to 1989, the first woman in her family to serve in the military. Teryl loved the demanding nature of being an MP and looked forward to a long career in the USMC. The physical demands of her job eventually took their toll, however, and Teryl was devastated when she had to retire due to injuries.

"It broke my heart," Teryl says. "I was just so sad and angry that I lost hope. To cover the pain, I drank." Her civilian friends did not understand what she was going through, Teryl says, and she was finding it difficult to adjust to life after service. "My friends would tell me I needed to "get over it." My drinking became progressively worse." Teryl knew she could not continue this way.

"I was mentally and emotionally wrecked. I knew something wasn't right, I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know where to go." Teryl was living in her car and trying to apply for County aid. Someone eventually told her to go to the VA for help, but she was hesitant because she thought the VA did not offer services for women. She soon found out otherwise.

When Teryl finally came to GLA, she learned of the VA's support services and programs that addressed women's issues. She also found a supportive staff that understood her concerns. When she was first admitted to the Domiciliary, a residential treatment program, Teryl says she "was surrounded by a wonderful staff [that] cared for my very survival." With the health care services she received at GLA, including mental health, dental, medical, and complimentary therapy services, Teryl was able to again take control of her life and be a strong role model for her adopted son.

"The VA saved my life," Teryl says.

"When I was a little girl, my mother told me about Humpty Dumpty. I was the Humpty Dumpty that the VA put back together piece by piece by piece." Teryl believes more Veterans can benefit from the services available at GLA. "No matter where you are in life, no matter how far you may have fallen, the VA is here to help us." □

For more information on how the VA can assist you, please visit our walk-in clinic for housing and community services assistance at our West Los Angeles location:
11301 Wilshire Blvd., Building 206
Los Angeles, CA 90073
Walk in Hours: 8am-3:30pm
VA National Homeless Hotline:
1-877 4AID VET, or 1-877-424-3838

"I was the humpty dumpty that the VA put back together, piece by piece by piece."

Teryl Sanabria,
U.S. Marine Corps Veteran

"Mindfulness shifts us into 'being mode.'"

Dr. Greg Serpa

Mindfulness and Well-Being

Did you know that stress plays a role in 7 of the 10 current leading causes of death, such as heart disease, cancer, and stroke? Tough times, pain, and loss are inevitable, but the attitude and skills we use to face them can help prevent chronic health conditions and promote well-being.

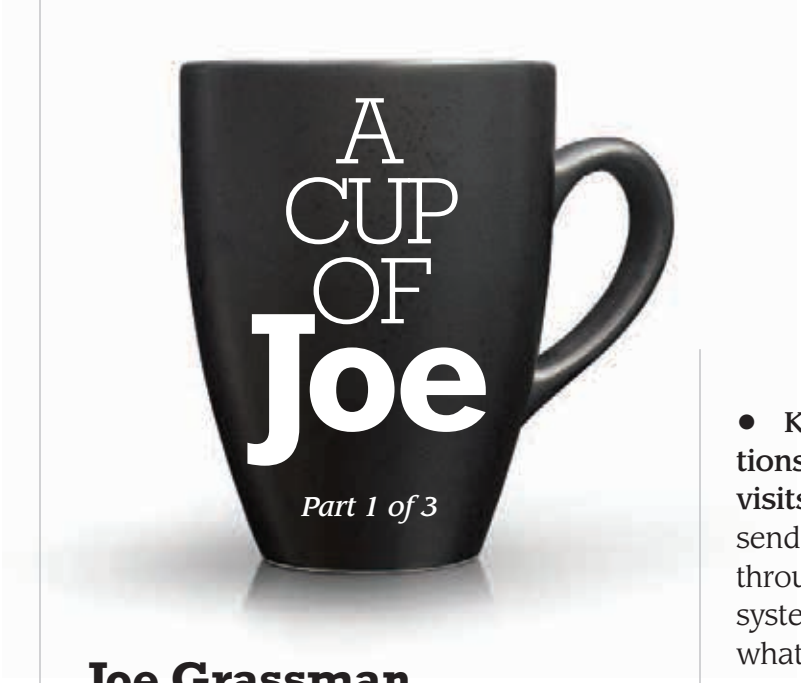
Mindfulness is a way to non-judgmentally observe things just as they are in the present moment. So often our minds are busy in "doing mode," worrying about the future or rehashing the past. Mindfulness teaches us how to shift from "doing mode" to "being mode." With mindfulness, we learn to accept and appreciate things in our life as they are now.

Training in mindfulness has been shown to improve a variety of mental and physical concerns. This shift into "being mode" with mindfulness is deeply healing; studies show immune systems work better and there are important brain changes in as little as 8 weeks. Veterans participating in GLA's mindfulness program report a decrease in depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and chronic pain, and an increase in their quality of life.

Join one of GLA's mindfulness classes to support your own program of health and well-being! Developing the attitude and skills of mindfulness can reduce your stress and have a real, positive impact on your health. We have introductory mindfulness classes at the West LA VA, Sepulveda Ambulatory Care Center, Los Angeles Ambulatory Care Center, Santa Barbara Clinic and, through telehealth technology, the Santa Maria Clinic. We also have an intensive Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program currently offered at West LA and Sepulveda Care Center.

GLA also offers the first Mindfulness Retreat program for Veterans in the nation. Retreats are open to all current MBSR participants and graduates and are offered 3-4 times a year. □

Please see your provider for a referral to a local Introduction to Mindfulness class. **If you would like to participate in the MBSR program, you may contact Dr. Greg Serpa at (310) 478-3711, ext. 49563.**



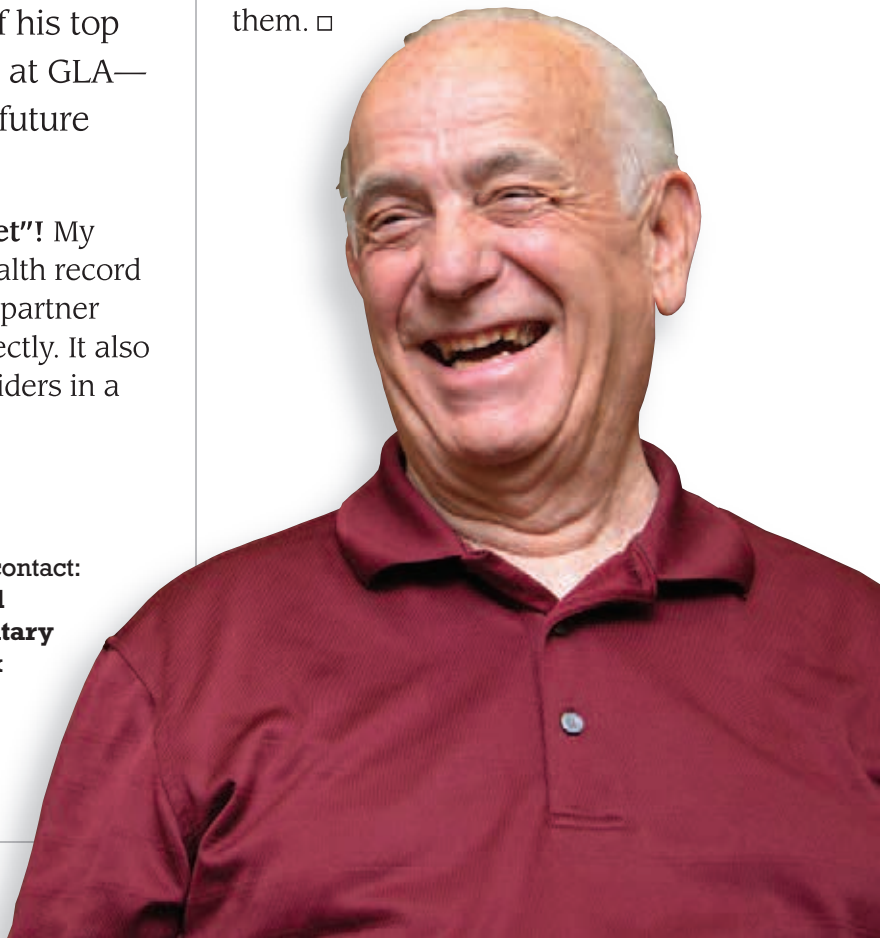
Joe Grassman, an Army paratrooper, has been a patient at GLA for eight years and now volunteers at GLA. He volunteers on the Patient Advisory Council at Sepulveda, the Service Quality Council, as a DAV driver, and with Veterans who are getting aquatic therapy. Joe shares some of his top tips for the best experience at GLA—stay tuned for more tips in future editions!

- **Sign up for "My HealtheVet"!** My HealtheVet is your personal health record via the internet, and helps you partner with your health care team directly. It also allows you to e-mail your providers in a confidential format.

- **Keep a list of your medical conditions (physical and mental) between visits.** A couple of weeks before your visit, send your prioritized list to your doctor through My HealtheVet's secure message system—this makes sure you discuss what's important to YOU, FIRST.

- **You will always be asked by doctors and nurses what your pain level is from 1 to 10.** Just because you're used to the pain or the pain is only in one area of your body and the rest of you is fine, do not give them a low number. Give them the number for the greatest pain level. VA wants to get your pain under control, so work with them. □

If you have questions, you can contact:
The Patient Advisory Council at Sepulveda by calling Voluntary Service (818) 895-9325, or ask Voluntary Services for the MyHealtheVet contact.



Just Do It!

Caught early, cancer can be beaten.

Tim Goheen has a family history of colon cancer–his mother, uncle, and grand-dad all had it. "And that's just the ones we know about," Tim adds. "My mom was afraid to have a colonoscopy. She thought it was unnecessary, and that it would hurt. She did develop colon cancer, and we lost her."

Tim was in the Navy Medical Corps in the 1970s. He went to nursing school on the GI Bill, and specialized in operating room procedures. He spent the last 10 years working at the VA, and has first-hand experience as a VA patient.

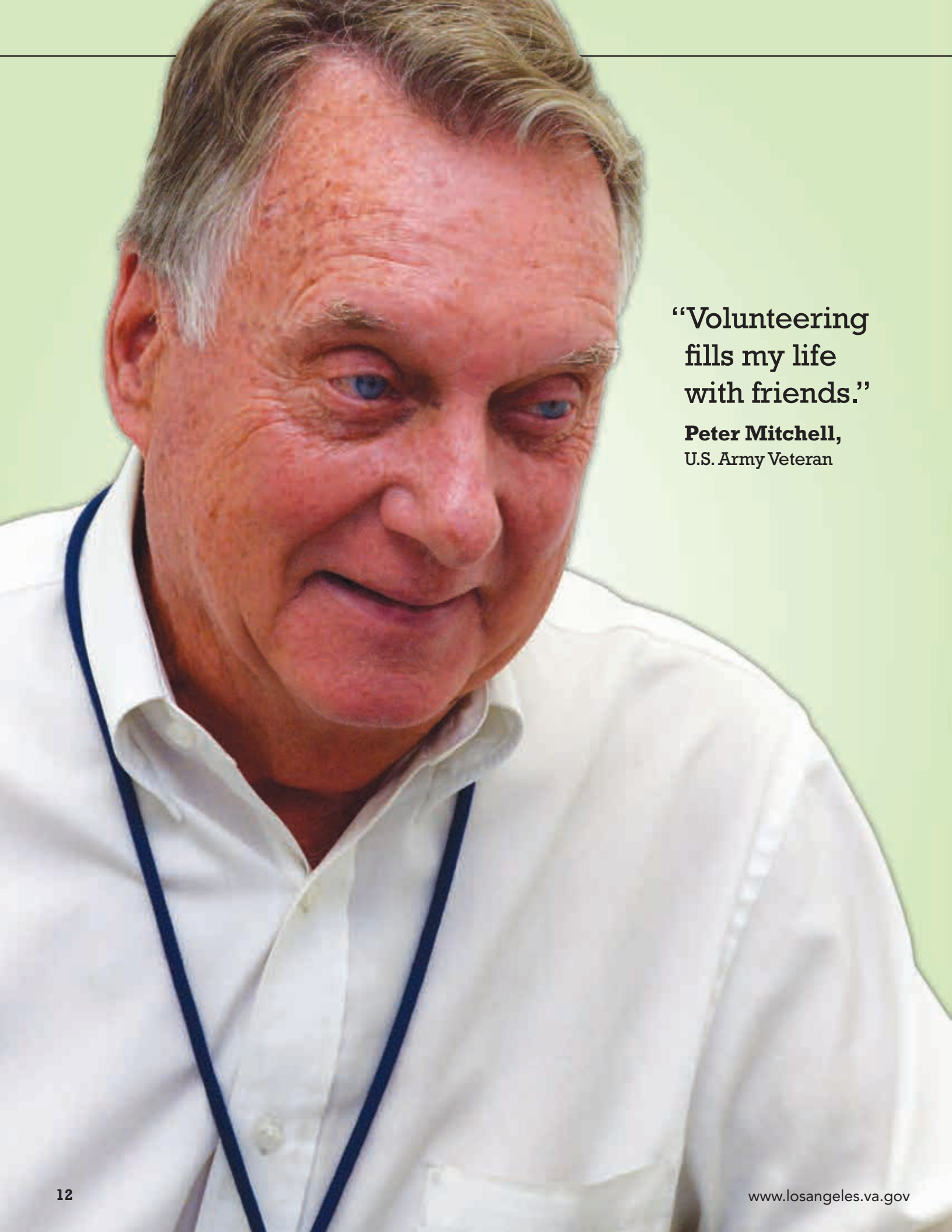
Tim didn't have any symptoms of colon cancer, but he was worried. So he asked his VA doctor to take a look. The whole procedure was painless and easy. They found multiple polyps, several of which were pre-cancerous. A year later, Tim had the procedure again and did not have any more pre-cancerous polyps.

The colon cancer screening is an outpatient procedure that looks for suspicious polyps and removes them before they become cancerous. Tim says that "the anesthetic is very good, you wake up quickly, you don't have any after effects, and no pain; we have better technology, better equipment, and better medicines these days."

> "The anesthetic is very good, you wake up quickly, you don't have any after effects, and no pain..."

Now Tim maintains his health with regular check-ups at the VA. He also stays healthy by eating a high fiber, low fat diet, and exercises by hiking. "You have to find something that holds your interest. Every Sunday you'll find me out hiking in the hills."

Tim says that if your doctor recommends a screening or procedure: **JUST DO IT.** □



"Volunteering fills my life with friends."

Peter Mitchell,
U.S. Army Veteran

Pay Back Time

The VA doctor told Peter Mitchell that he needed to lose weight, become more positive, and meet new friends. "Wow," thought Peter, "which one should I start with?" His doctor suggested volunteering could address all of his recommendations.

Research has shown that volunteering as little as 4 hours a week can lower blood pressure, sharpen cognitive skills, improve social skills, and extend life expectancy. Instead of expecting others to take care of all our needs now is a great time to "pay back" for all the good things done to help us over the years.

Where can you volunteer? Local public libraries, hospitals, and schools are always in need of volunteers. Every VA hospital in the U.S. has a Voluntary Services Office that helps connect interested volunteers with opportunities.

You can help with events, learn new on-the-job skills in every Department, help build your resume, and explore new fields as a volunteer.

> "Now is a great time to 'pay back' for all the good things done to help us over the years."

Next time you see your primary doctor, let him or her know that you are now volunteering to help others as well as yourself. Take it from Peter—you will feel better about yourself for helping fellow Veterans in their time of need and improve your well-being! □

For more information on volunteering at GLA, contact **Sadie Stewart in Voluntary Services at (310) 268-4350.**

The Benefits of Tai Chi

Even though Richard Ming lives in the Santa Maria area where there are plenty of opportunities to get out and enjoy life, he was having a hard time getting out and socializing. Richard's friends had died, he had no family in the area, and his world seemed to be getting smaller and smaller. He had lots of aches and pains, and he didn't feel good at all. As a Marine, he tried to tough it out, but that approach wasn't working. Life was pretty grim.

Then his health care team at GLA suggested Tai Chi. At first Richard was skeptical. "That seemed pretty out there," he said. But his clinic staff persisted, and he decided to give it a try.

At the GLA Santa Maria Clinic, Tai Chi is offered through telehealth, televised from GLA's West Los Angeles location. Master Instructor Peter Asco broadcasts his Tai Chi program to the other GLA clinics so many Vets can benefits from Tai Chi.

"It's like I came out of my shell," says Richard.

"Peter is a genius," Richard said, "and he seems to be able to work with all of us. He knows we are there in the audience, and he works us out." Richard realized that Tai Chi was helping him feel much better physically. Coming to the Santa Maria Clinic for the Tai Chi classes also got him out of the house, and he started going out regularly to run errands and see what's going on around town. "It's like I came out of my shell," said Richard. He highly recommends Tai Chi or any other type of gentle exercise for Vets "as a way to start on a healthy path to the rest of your life." Good advice, Mr. Ming.

If you are interested in Tai Chi, please contact **Carol Stein at (310) 478-3711, x43281**

GLA the Perfect Wedding Venue for This WWII Vet

Jack Wright's visit to GLA's Radiation Oncology Department on May 7, 2013 was for something far more special than his usual chemotherapy treatment; while the radiation therapy machine was down for a brief break, "Captain Jack" married his sweetheart.

GLA's Radiation Oncology Department may be an unusual venue for a wedding, but for Mr. Wright and his new wife, Shirlene (nee King), it was the perfect place to celebrate with the people who had come to mean so much to them. Mr. Wright, a World War II Veteran, had been receiving daily chemoradiation treatment there for several months and both he and Shirlene had developed strong relationships with many of the staff members.

Dr. Diana Gage, Mr. Wright's Radiation Oncology physician, would joke with him during his weekly check-ups, asking when he was going to marry his girlfriend of 30 years. "Right now!" Mr. Wright would say. Dr. Gage and the Oncology team decided that they would help make that happen. Dr. Gage suggested the Wrights hold their wedding in the Oncology Department. The Wrights agreed "because of the special bond we have all formed with this lovely couple," Dr. Gage said, and GLA staff excitedly got to work.

Staff members from Oncology, Public Affairs, and the Office of the Patient Experience banded together to bring in decorations, flowers, music, a photographer and videographer, food and a beautiful wedding cake for the reception, and even "something borrowed and something blue" for the bride. Mr. Wright's reverend friend officiated the ceremony and one of the Oncology staff walked the bride down the aisle. The Wrights were married in front of about 30 of their friends and health care staff, with Mr. Wright answering one of the wedding vows with...

> "...you bet your sweet life" instead of the usual "I do."

Patient centered care goes beyond medical treatment. "I am touched by the outpouring of support from my staff," Dr. Gage said. Mr. Wright appreciated the staff's enthusiasm in putting together a wedding on short notice, admitting he got "a little teary eyed." □

Voice of the Veteran

It's your voice, so let us hear it!

What issues are important to you?

What do you want more information about?

What would you like to see highlighted in future editions?

We welcome all suggestions and comments. Please use an additional sheet of paper if needed. Submit to:

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Office of the Patient Experience

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SUMMER 2013

We've Re-Designed Our Entire Website for One Reason… YOU!

The entire Department of Veterans Affairs began the process of an agency-wide website redesign in 2012. Why? Because you told us in our customer satisfaction surveys that you wanted your information in a fresh and up-to-date design.

Some of our home page changes include easier navigation, where to find our community based outpatient clinics, and a quick link to My Health*e*Vet, VA's electronic health portal which allows you to manage your health care from anywhere.

This is your website. This new look and design is the result of feedback we received from you. Thank you. We hope you enjoy the new design and will find time to look through the many pages of information waiting for you behind the new home page.

Visit us at:
www.losangeles.va.gov

And don't forget to join us on:

Facebook.com/LosAngelesVA

Twitter.com/LosAngelesVA