Henry Bowe is an Army Veteran who started volunteering at McGuire VA Medical Center in 2005 as an American Legion representative for Post 186. The facility awarded Bowe as Volunteer of the Year, June 24.

Bowe can be found across the facility helping patients and hosting events such as Picnic in the Park, Dining Out Program, and the Veterans resource fair.

“He’s an awesome volunteer,” said Gerald Westry, Chief of Voluntary Services. “He does so many things for us! He works at the front desk; he helps Veterans with their claims. You name it, he does it. I just can’t say enough good things about him.”

More than 500 volunteers serve at McGuire every year. This year, volunteers provided almost 60,000 hours of service valued at nearly 1.5 million dollars. Thank you volunteers for all your dedication and hard work.
Wheelchaired Veterans weaved between brightly colored cones, dipped low to avoid obstacles and overcame numerous hurdles as they raced on a custom-built slalom course at McGuire VA Medical Center.

The event, which was held July 11, was geared towards helping Veterans prepare for the National Veterans Wheelchair Games.

At McGuire, Veterans had two course options: a standard route geared toward motorized wheelchairs, and an advanced course for manual operated wheelchairs. Veterans had two days to practice before the timed event.

In the advanced course, participants navigated over various obstacles, such as ropes, bungee cords, and makeshift speed bumps.

“The hardest part was the bungee cord,” said Carolyn Andrews, an Army Veteran who completed her fourth slalom challenge. “My wheels kept getting caught, which made it difficult, but I’m doing my wheelies better.”

One obstacle on the standard course involved carrying an empty cooler past an “X” marked on the ground. The advanced course participants tossed tennis balls into a bucket and popped wheelies over small cones.

“It was fun, lots of fun,” said Air Force Veteran Kathleen Ivey. “I had a good time. It’s funny sometimes, the things you think you can and cannot do. It was definitely a challenge for me.”

Some obstacles required drivers to navigate backwards. Tennis balls that dangled on a string forced contestants to avoid them. Participants raced against the clock as they tried to avoid penalties for directional mishaps, ball movement, or displaced cones added seconds to the final time.

“Of course, I always want to win first place; that’s how I do,” said Marine Veteran William Lee, winner of the standard wheelchair course. “If I had my other wheelchair you would have really seen some stuff. I would be popping wheelies and such.”

Every second counted for Army Veteran Johnny “Quadzilla” Holland, who won the advanced course with less than a 2-second lead.

“It was fun,” Holland said. “For me it was tough. Going over that wooden [obstacle] was a challenge.”

Amina Chaudhry, an intern for recreational therapy, worked with the carpentry shop on many of the obstacles. The carpenter’s expertise ensured the obstacles had varying degrees of difficulty, were easy to store, and represented every branch of the military, said Chaudhry.

Chaudhry designed both slalom course to fulfill requirements for her degree in recreational therapy.

“I asked the other (recreational) therapists what they need,” Chaudhry said. “They asked for a slalom course to help the Veterans get ready for the wheelchair games, so that’s exactly what I did. It was fun to plan the course. I’m happy I’m leaving the internship with something they can use in the future.”

This year, 36 Veterans from the McGuire VAMC Adaptive Sports Program and Mid Atlantic PVA participated in the National Veterans Wheel Chair Games in Cincinnati Ohio, July 17-22. While competing against Veterans across the nation the team won 49 gold medals, 24 silver medals and 23 bronze medals.
A researcher at McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond is testing innovative ways to treat Veterans who suffer from hepatic encephalopathy (HE), a brain condition caused by liver disease.

Initially caused by liver failure, HE can present itself as confusion, a dementia-like state, or possibly a coma. New research in preliminary stages by Dr. Jasmohan Bajaj has shown fecal transplants may help mitigate symptoms of this condition.

“HE is a spectrum of changes,” Dr. Bajaj explained. “People can be completely asymptomatic but have problems in their life where they can’t do their jobs. But they’re not confused. Some people start becoming confused and disoriented, and their family members notice there’s a change with them. It can even lead all the way to coma if left unchecked.”

Bajaj is a hepatology physician and researcher working with community partners to test fecal transplant methods that could be more effective for treating HE than current options. According to Bajaj, this disease is one of the leading causes of hospital readmission for Veterans.

“It’s a major burden to the Veterans and their families because with multiple episodes, they become dependent on their caregivers,” Bajaj said. “Even in the VA, where most of the medical care is covered, it’s still a huge financial nightmare for people because they have to give up their jobs. The caregiver can feel trapped because you don’t know when the patient is going to have a problem.”

In a limited sample size, the fecal transplant showed promising results. Over the course of the five-month study, the patients who received the fecal transplant through an enema had zero HE-related episodes or hospitalizations. Bajaj also noted brain functions increased for these patients. Of the patients who continued with traditional treatment, five were hospitalized due to HE episodes, and one was hospitalized twice.

Bajaj said the primary outcome for this round of research was to ensure the procedure is safe for patients. Further studies will focus on efficacy.

“We found no adverse reactions to the fecal transplant,” he said. “We hope to get more funding to do this in a proper randomized way, so we can compare the capsules to the enema and to do it in people who are similarly underserved.”

Bajaj is now researching a pill to deliver the fecal transplant, rather than through an enema. His goal is to eventually compare the effectiveness of each method to see which is best.

Bajaj said he hopes this research will continue to show improvement in the quality of life for Veterans. •
Guests were greeted with classic old school music at the McGuire VA Medical Center for the annual Fourth of July barbecue sponsored by the Disabled American Veterans (DAV).

More than 20 volunteers from the DAV, American Legion and DAV Auxiliary provided support to McGuire’s inpatient Veterans. Volunteers delivered lunch to patients’ bedsides, helped to escort wheelchair-bound patients, and thanked each Veteran for their service.

Guests grooved to music by the Midnighters with hits like Great Balls of Fire, and Shake Rattle and Roll.

Many people were dressed in patriotic attire like Terri Smith (pictured on back cover), a Vietnam Veteran caregiver. Smith greeted everyone with a smile as she sported red, white, and blue from head to toe.

“I wanted to spruce up the place with my outfit because they don’t get to do things like this that often,” Smith said.

It wouldn’t be an event without Eleanor Cunningham, who refers to herself as Mama Love Bug. For years, she visited the hospital to support her husband.

“After being here nearly every day for eight years, you simply can’t stop coming,” Cunningham said. “I’ve never stopped coming. If anything comes up, I’m here.”

For many, both Veterans and volunteers, it was their first year attending the Independence Day festivity.

One first-timer was Army Veteran Michele Goings, who serves as the DAV Auxiliary Commander for Unit 47 in Petersburg.

“My people just came out tremendously,” Goings said, giving two thumbs up. “We all came together... We enjoy connecting with one another and interacting with the Vets. I definitely will do it again next year.” •
Just days before celebrating his 100th birthday, Lt. Col. (Ret.) Louis Martin stopped by the podiatry department for a checkup, June 27. Martin, a World War II Veteran, said he had his first surgery with the VA in Richmond before the current building was constructed. The current building was dedicated in 1983. Martin, stopped for a group photo with employees from the Podiatry Clinic.

McGuire employee Dan Emel, a social worker, was selected as one of six American Made Heroes by Evan Williams distillery. Emel was given the opportunity to donate $10,000 to the charity of his choice. He chose the VA.

ALL EMPLOYEE SURVEY
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VA Voices kicks off in Richmond on August 29. Please contact your service chief to attend a future VA Voices experience. VA Voices is a two-day experiential training for employees that uses the power of story sharing to connect and strengthen relationships. Over the two days, participants will learn to understand the value of these relationships for yourself and others, connect your personal values with your role at work, recognize how you impact others, and learn methods that lead to more productive conversations at work and in all aspects of life.

FIVE LOCAL VA INNOVATIONS SELECTED FOR NATIONAL DEMO DAY D.C. EVENT

3D Printed Cane Clip to Improve Patient Safety on Mobility Scooter
........John Miller

Beneficiary Travel Software to Automate Claims Paid to Veterans
........Christina Hubble

Patient-Centered Flow Design in Dialysis
........Christina Aguilar

Sodium Tracker App - Shake Salt
........Monika Aggarwal

Low Vision Button Kit for Veterans With Vision Limitations
........Brian Burkhardt

Approximately 30 students from Richmond’s Math Science Innovation Center visited the McGuire VA Medical Center for a tour. The students are part of the Summer Regional Governor’s School which offers courses for middle school children identified as gifted by their school divisions. The students spent time in several areas of the hospital while researching their summer project to create a prosthetic arm or leg. The students toured the Assistive Technology, Biomedical Engineering, Prosthetics, and Spinal Cord Injury and Disorder Research departments.

John Fox, chief of the orthotics lab at the McGuire VA Medical Center, fits a makeshift prosthetic device to a student from Richmond’s Summer Regional Governor’s School during a tour Wednesday, June 28. The device allows the wearer to utilize a body-controlled prosthesis to perform a simple grasping function.

Dr. Ashraf Gorgey, lead researcher for the Spinal Cord Injury and Disorder department at the McGuire VA Medical Center, teaches a group of students about the research his lab conducts with paralyzed patients. Approximately 30 students from the Summer Regional Governor’s School visited the facility on June 28.