VETERAN SPOTLIGHT

Meet William Bigger

What branch of service did you serve in?
I served in the United States Marine Corps.

What were your years of service?
I spent six and a half years in the service, from 1975 to 1981.

What was your most memorable experience while serving active duty?
Some of my most memorable experiences are from serving at many of the United Nations embassies.

Tell us something about you that most people would not know.
I am very successful, and I am a very outgoing person.

What does being a Veteran mean to you?
It means a whole lot. It means you served your country with blood, sweat, and tears by going overseas. It is an honor to be an American.

Why do you choose VA?
The VA gave me my life back. The hospital staff are very beautiful people here, they did everything in their power to make me whole again. I give my hats off to them.

Cover photo: Cyclists from the Department of Veterans Affairs and Project Hero ride in formation on the Virginia Capital Trail as part of a hub training program to help spread the sport of cycling to other VA hospitals around the country. Photo courtesy of Tiffini Skuce, Project Hero.

Back photo: Vertical construction recently began on the four-story parking garage near the primary care clinic entrances. The garage will add 300 new parking spaces for the medical center.
In early October, the McGuire VA Medical Center welcomed a specialized training team from Project Hero to help spread the sport of cycling to other VA facilities.

Recently, the Dept. of Veterans Affairs and the California-based nonprofit announced a partnership to bring official Project Hero hubs to VA medical centers across the U.S. Project Hero’s mission is to bring therapeutic cycling programs to Veterans and first responders affected by injury, post-traumatic stress disorder, military sexual trauma and traumatic brain injury.

“I believe my Veterans will benefit from Project Hero,” said Shannon O’Rawe, recreation therapist at the Tennessee Valley Healthcare System in Nashville. “This nonprofit complements the Recreational Therapy Program at VA in Nashville as we are focused on adaptive sports and overall Veteran health and wellness.”

The weeklong training program included discussions, demonstrations and hands-on instruction for both new and experienced riders. Project Hero brought a dedicated team of cycling experts, Veterans, and other personnel to help participants gain in-depth knowledge about the sport of cycling. The group practiced in various settings, such as the City of Richmond and Virginia Capital Trail.

“Cycling is not only an enjoyable sport, but it is also a competitive sport that a lot of my Veterans have taken interest in competing,” O’Rawe added. “Specifically, my Veterans who compete in the Golden Age Games will benefit the most.”

Army Veteran Mike Kanney has taken part in several Project Hero rides in the past. To him, and other Veterans he has spoken with, cycling can be an alternative therapy to combat the effects of PTSD.

“This is in addition to all the therapies offered here at McGuire,” Kanney said. “It’s not a showboat program. The sole purpose is to help Veterans.”


VA employees from several medical centers throughout the US attended Project Hero’s first VA-specific Hub training program to teach both new and experienced cyclists how to start a similar program at their respective facilities. VA clinicians from North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Arizona, and Tennessee attended the event.

Photos courtesy of Tiffini Skuce, Project Hero.
NEW AND IMPROVED ROOM SERVICE COMING SOON

A new system is being rolled out soon to improve the quality of food that is served to inpatient Veterans at McGuire VA Medical Center.

Karin Shealey-Hill, Chief of the Nutrition & Food Service (NFS) department at McGuire, broke the news to the Veterans Advisory Board Friday, Sept. 29. Along with NFS chefs Allen King and Thomas Millican, Shealy-Hill served a sample meal to the group, giving them a chance to taste what will soon be offered to Veteran inpatients.

The Veterans were served Skillet Chicken with Roasted Potatoes and Carrots, one of more than 20 entrée options that will be on the new menus. The reaction was overwhelmingly positive.

“I can’t believe it’s hospital food,” said Air Force Veteran Lou Vallette, a service officer for the American Legion. “If they’d been serving this when I was here, I wouldn’t have left.”

Kenny Massey, a retired command sgt. maj., joked that the facility should offer seconds for good behavior.

The NFS personnel emphasized that they were excited to be making Veterans happier.

Millican, a retired Marine Master Sergeant, has been working as a chef for the VA for three years. “I love what I do,” he said. “I just want to make it better for Veterans.”

“My biggest metric is patient satisfaction,” said Shealey-Hill, adding that it’s also an economically sound move. “We believe this will save us money, but patient satisfaction is all that matters.”

Currently, NFS receives some of its food from Hampton, Va., where food is prepared for all seven VA medical centers throughout Virginia and North Carolina. Once the new program is implemented, all food for Richmond Veterans will be prepared in-house and delivered hot and fresh to their room, said Shealey-Hill.

“We’ll be giving Veterans what they want, how they want it, when they want it,” Shealey-Hill said. “They can choose their meals whenever they’re ready to eat.”

The room service menu will contain about 30 items, including entrees, vegetable choices, meats, specials, and more. The food will be plated and brought to the Veteran on a heated dish, ensuring the temperature remains ideal. Veterans will also be able to order customized sandwiches and salads.

Shealey-Hill said the next step will be to integrate the room service system with in-room technology, which will allow patients to place orders from their television screens.

Above: Skillet chicken with roasted potatoes and carrots is one of more than 20 meals that will be available through McGuire’s new room service menu.
Recently, the McGuire VA Medical Center welcomed its new Women Veterans Program Manager to the team. Elizabeth Murphey has held several positions at McGuire in areas such as geriatrics, hospice and palliative care, and with the Office of the Chief of Staff. With each position, she says her ultimate goal is always to help underserved populations.

Since female Veterans are one of the fastest growing populations in the hospital, Murphey said she hopes to open doors and make them feel welcome.

When the opportunity to work with female Veterans arose, Murphey said she could not pass it up. Murphey, a licensed clinical social worker, has many initiatives to help improve care to female patients.

A stand-alone women’s health clinic will be coming to McGuire in the future, and Murphey is excited to enhance women’s healthcare and centralize services for female Veterans such as radiology, primary care, gender-specific care, and other services.

Murphey is part of a coalition between the Virginia Department of Veterans Services and VA hospitals in Richmond, Hampton, and Salem. The goal behind this coalition is to create a streamlined process for bringing in and referring female patients to appropriate services. Often, when women return home from deployment or finish their enlistment, they do not have many other female Veterans in their social circles, Murphey explained.

The hope is to spark interactions between female Veterans to help them grow their social support systems.

Ultimately, Murphey said she aspires to provide a safe haven for women to heal physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Murphey said she was inspired to work with Veterans by her family. Her uncle served as a Marine in the Korean War. It was thought that this military service contributed to several issues in his life, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, alcoholism, and substance abuse. He also battled homelessness after his return, Murphey said. Later, he ended up in a VA hospital and was diagnosed with stage-4 cancer. A caring social worker went above and beyond to find relatives so he could live with family for the last year of his life.

Because of the exemplary help by the social worker, he was finally able to spend time with a family, Murphey added.

Murphey’s drive to improve the female Veteran experience in healthcare will be coupled with new initiatives and fresh ideas to bring about positive change to Veterans in the community.

“It is an honor to serve here,” Murphey said. “It is my way of giving back.”

Story by special contributor Sydney Dudley
THE POWER OF A SMILE

One day I was walking through the hallway when I ran into the Voluntary Services Chief Gerald Westry. He asked me if I would be interested in being an Ambassador, because I smiled and spoke to everyone in passing. I said of course, whatever I can do to help the Veterans.

I asked my unit manager and she agreed the role of greeting and helping Veterans fit for me. It's been a pleasure and honor giving back to our Veterans as a member of the Ambassador Plus Program.

I greet them with a smile and warm welcome for their service at the main entrance. I escort them to their appointments, also push them in wheelchairs if I see that they’re unable to walk far. Then, I stay to make sure they’re at the right clinic before leaving. Seeing the relief on their face that someone took the time to take them to their appointment instead of pointing which direction takes a big load off their shoulders.

Some Veterans get dropped off at the door with no one to help them get around. Being an ambassador, I can take away that anxiety of them trying to do it on their own. All it takes to make their day is someone to care about them. The Veterans tell me how much they appreciate my help, that having someone to take them to their appointments is a great idea. I like to use my time as a government employee wisely. If I have some down time it’s going to be used to help our men and women that served this country.

I take pride in being an Ambassador. It’s second nature for me to help those in need. If I could be an Ambassador all day, every day, I would do it. The smiles on the Veterans faces and the relief of knowing that someone truly cares about them keeps me going back.

Joanne White

For information on how employees can join the Ambassador Plus Program, contact Voluntary Service at extension 5135.

Breast Cancer Awareness Walk

October 27, 2017

Joanne White, Nursing Assistant on 4B.
This October, therapists continued to raise awareness of physical therapy as a safe and effective alternative to opioids for the long-term treatment of chronic pain.

VA physical therapists and physical therapy assistants are health care professionals helping individuals maintain, restore, and improve movement, activity, and functioning, thereby enabling optimal performance and enhancing health, well-being, and quality of life. Therapists are located in many different settings within VA.

In FY2016, VA Physical Therapists and Physical Therapy Assistants cared for more than 720,000 Veterans during nearly 3.2 million unique visits. There are currently more than 2,224 Physical Therapists, and an additional 503 Physical Therapy Assistants working in the VA health care system.

Please thank your physical therapists for meeting the 21st Century needs of Veterans and their families.

Kindred Hospice donates 3,000 pounds of food to McGuire Homeless Veterans Program.

“Our Veterans gave up so much so we can have the freedom to live and enjoy this wonderful country,” said Wanda Burton, Volunteer Service Manager for Kindred Hospice. “No Veteran should be homeless and hungry. I always say it is the little things that make a difference. The Kindred Team is pledging to make the little things count for our veterans – one can at a time.”

Food donations tend to be lower in the summer months causing high demand and nearly empty food pantries. For this reason, Kindred Hospice chose August to provide an abundant food donation.