



Veteran participant Jerry Shields heads down the Snowmass slopes in a sit-ski. Below, the Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, left, speaks with National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson at the sponsor dinner.

Winter Sports Clinic

Much more than skiing for disabled veterans

By D. Clare

When most people think of the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, they think of snow skiing. But the slopes were the last thing on the mind of aspiring writers at a creative writing continuing education class.

New York Times best-selling author Anthony Swofford had given a brief lecture and broken the class into small groups for a writing exercise.

A small group of recently-disabled veterans, most patients at the VA's

Polytrauma Hospital in Palo Alto, were tasked with identifying a list of the five happiest or best moments of their lives and the five saddest or worst.

Shared on all of the Palo Alto veterans' lists of challenging times was the death of fellow patient Faoa "A.P." Apineru, a friend and leader whose life

was cut short as a result of his injury.

No one mentioned the day they became disabled. The words Iraq and Afghanistan or injury were left out completely—even as one member mentioned the television series *Grey's Anatomy* as one of the saddest things. "It always makes me cry," admitted the towering Jason Poole, a retired Marine who suffered a severe traumatic brain injury.

On top of everyone's list of happiest moments was the day they woke up in the hospital with a new life ahead of them.

"The day I got hurt isn't even in my top ten," said Poole. "It's not in the top 15. I mean, it really, really sucked and all. But I don't even really remember it. The day I woke up was the day I knew I was alive. That was the best day."



The clinic is the largest rehabilitative sporting event of its kind in the world. More than 450 veterans came to ski, fly fish, rock climb, play sled hockey, scuba dive and take part in numerous other sports and activities.

While the rehabilitative events give veterans a lesson in limitless possibilities and potential, a host of other events off the slopes unite the veterans as members of a community and give them the opportunity for education and mentorship.

Before the creative writing class, service-dog owners and trainers met to discuss the care and availability of canine companions. On other nights, a special agent with the Secret Service taught self-defense and traumatic brain injury veterans shared their stories of survival above and beyond the adversity their injuries caused.

One evening, DAV Past National Commander Chad Colley and his wife Betty Anne hosted a discussion entitled "Veterans—Not Just About You!" The couple spoke about relationships between disabled veterans and their spouses and offered sage advice on maintaining marriages.

Women also had a reception of their own to talk about the issues they face and to bond as veterans and participants. As the veterans met together and in smaller groups, they developed lifestyle solutions and gained inspiration that will reverberate beyond the event.

"I think you will do things this week some of you thought you would never do again," Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki told the veterans at the event's opening ceremonies.

Shinseki, a disabled veteran who lost part of his right foot in Vietnam, said experiencing a life-altering event changes the body, but not the person. "Your dreams and hopes are just as real today," he told the veterans. "It's the heart and the mind that keep hope alive."

Attending the first clinic held since taking the reigns of the VA, the retired general, thanked DAV National Commander Raymond E. Dempsey as a fellow veteran and life member of the DAV. He credited the partnership between the government and the DAV for the success of the event.

"We at the DAV and VA are around disabled veterans constantly. The clinic is a reminder of the importance of our mission and the amazing resilience veterans show when they're given the chance to shine," said Commander Dempsey. "It reminds us not to take anything for granted in our lives.

"We're grateful for the support we receive from our corporate, non-profit and private sponsors. This event means so much to our community, and it wouldn't be possible without the team we take up that mountain every year."

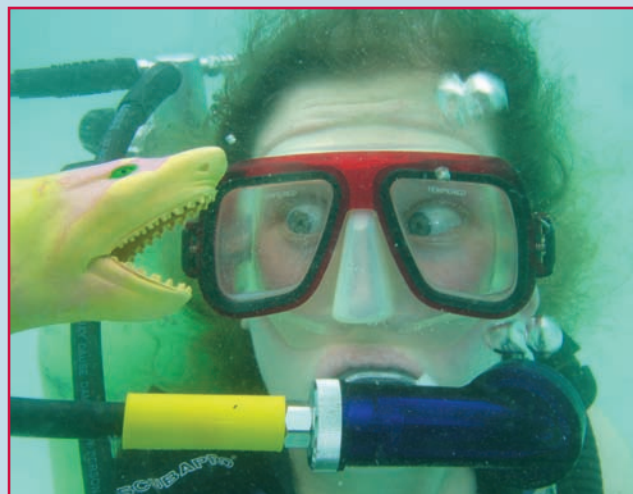


Left, veterans deliver their individual presentations in the writing exercise during a continuing education class taught by best-selling author, Anthony Swofford. Right and below, Josh "Zero" Boyce, U.S. Marine Corps veteran participates in the curling competition at Snowmass.





Veterans prepare for the puck to drop in the highly competitive sled hockey tournament.



A veteran participant encounters a "shark" during scuba diving lessons.

Portray Woods

On April 18, 2004, this year's Freedom Award recipient was serving in the Army's 1st Armored Division on a reconnaissance patrol in Baghdad. Portray Woods was behind a .50 caliber machine gun when a roadside bomb claimed his right arm and left thumb. He woke up at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center to the sound of his four-year-old daughter singing the song he'd taught her before his deployment – "You Are My Sunshine."

Woods had suffered the signature a traumatic brain injury. He couldn't walk, talk or see out of his left eye and was told those abilities were likely gone forever. He was paralyzed on his right side. In his heart, the former collegiate basketball player was scared.

But his courage defied his fear. With the support of his family who traveled from all over the country to be with him through every step of his recovery, Woods fought tirelessly through an intensive rehabilitation program. In time he was talking again, and walking, and pushing himself beyond the limitations his multiple injuries had caused.

In 2008, Woods attended his first National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. The event reaffirmed the tremendous strides he'd taken in recovery. He quickly picked up downhill skiing, cross-country skiing and other events. He joined DAV Chapter 52 in Indianapolis and continued to rapidly advance and exceed expectations throughout his recovery there at the Richard L. Roudebush VA Medical Center.

"When we look for a Freedom Award recipient, we look for a participant who embodies the spirit of the clinic. We look for a leader who is inspiring his or her fellow veterans — an individual who leads by example and encourages everyone around them to shine," said National Commander Raymond E. Dempsey.

"Portray is someone who defied the odds to survive and continues to inspire and lead both at this event and back home where he volunteers selflessly to brighten the lives of his fellow veterans."

"He is a fighter and a survivor who embodies the warrior spirit. And if you talk with him for more than a minute, he's going to have you smiling. He's a special young man and a prime example of what the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic is all about."



U.S. Army veteran Portray Woods, left, with National Commander Raymond E. Dempsey.

Jayme, Joey, Violet Skye Bozik and Josh, Joey's service dog. Below, Joey zips down the course on a sit-ski.



Ted and Sarah Wade. Above, Ted on the downhill slope at Snowmass.



Ilem Appointed Deputy Legislative Director

National Commander Raymond E. Dempsey has approved National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson's appointment of Joy J. Ilem as Deputy National Legislative Director at the National Service and Legislative Headquarters in Washington, D.C.


Ilem, a 1996 graduate of the National Service Officer Training Academy, was appointed Assistant National Legislative Director on Aug. 24, 2000, after joining the legislative staff as an Associate Director in April 1999.



Ilem

"In her new position, Ilem will play a key role in advancing DAV's public policy objectives to promote and defend reasonable and responsible legislation to assist disabled veterans and their families," said Adjutant Wilson.

Ilem, a U.S. Army service-connected disabled veteran, is a life member of Chapter 10 in Arlington-Fairfax, Va. In 1996 she served as a National Service Officer trainee in Phoenix, Ariz., before being assigned in 1997 as a National Appeals Officer with the DAV staff at the Board of Veterans Appeals in Washington, D.C.

"We offer Joy our sincere congratulations in her new position," Wilson said. "We know that she will continue to carry out her new responsibilities with the same sense of professionalism that has marked her career with the DAV." 



Memorial Donation ...

Members of Chapter 1, St. Louis, Mo., proudly display a check for \$5,000 they raised to help build the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. Holding the check are, from left, Ex-POW Charlie Foley, Chapter Commander Larry Endicott, Department Commander Harold Menzel, and Past Chapter Commander and VAVS Representative Harold Wisley.