Kiana Johnson
2014 Milwaukee VA Medical Center Employee of the Year
A Presidential Note

Robert Beller, Milwaukee VA Medical Center director, received this personal note from President Barack Obama in response to a letter from James Maurer. Maurer told us he always receives outstanding care and responses from Jerry Peltier, a registered nurse in the Yellow Clinic, and his primary care provider, Dr. David Wagner. "The quality of care I get here is better than anything I've ever been provided in the private sector," he said. "I told the president to share my note with Congress and everyone in the Department of Veterans Affairs."

Robert Beller
Medical Center Director

Jim McLain
Deputy Director

Drew DeWitt
Assistant Director

Michael D. Erdmann, MD
Chief of Staff

Julia Roberts
Associate Director for Patient/Nursing Services

Gary J. Kunich
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Copy Editor

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5000 West National Ave.
Milwaukee, WI 53295
www.milwaukee.va.gov

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

March 12, 2015

Mr. Robert H. Beller
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Dear Robert:

One of your patients, James Maurer, wrote to tell me about the outstanding work you and your staff are doing. This is just a quick note to thank you for your dedication.

I want you to know I am grateful for your efforts to lift up the lives of our Nation’s heroes. By helping our veterans receive the care and support they deserve, you are setting a positive example for all of us.

I hope you take pride in the difference you have made, and I wish you and your team the very best.

Sincerely,

Barack Obama
**Chief of staff takes national honors**

By Gary J. Kunich

Chief of Staff Dr. Michael Erdmann is winner of the national 2014 John D. Chase Award for Executive Excellence from the Veterans Health Administration. Erdmann began his VA career here as a chief resident in 1986. He has been chief of staff for 17 years.

The Chase Award is given annually for sustained executive leadership from any health care discipline.

Erdmann has risen through the ranks and sat at the helm of health care during a period of great change in VA.

“When I started we didn’t have primary care clinics,” he said. “We had one general clinic, and most people who came in had to be hospitalized, sometimes unnecessarily. You could smoke openly in the hospital; patients could even smoke in their rooms.

“Things evolve and we have seen great changes. Back then, technology just did not exist. There was no such thing as an MRI scanner, and the idea of a CT scan was just a thought.”

Erdmann ran the first HIV clinic at the hospital and helped transition the Milwaukee VA to a primary care model with women and primary care clinics, among other noticeable changes.

“This never was my plan to end up as chief of staff,” he said. “Honestly, I didn’t have a plan, but this is the perfect place to be. I’m very proud of how VA has changed and what we accomplished. We sometimes get unfairly criticized, but a lot of advancements have been made in medicine because of VA — electronic medical records, bar code technology for medication administration, research — it’s all because of VA.

“Some people complain about change, or you can get to work and be a part of the change. It’s exciting because it’s for the patient,” Erdmann said. “VA is still the best system for the right care, at the right time, at the right place. In VA, you do the right thing for the Veteran, and not just what they can pay for. That’s why I stay.”

According to the nomination package, some of Erdmann’s accomplishments include:

- Transformed the medical center’s entire delivery system to a primary care-based model
- Added two additional care locations while expanding patient services
- Guided the complete remodeling of the ambulatory procedure center, intensive care unit, acute medical unit, acute surgical unit, a new Spinal Cord Injury center and many of the clinic areas
- Patient satisfaction numbers are among the highest in the country for VA medical centers.

But Erdmann said the credit goes to those working in the medical center day in and out.

“Let’s be honest, I’m surrounded by great people who have made these things happen. If I’ve done anything, I’ve given them the opportunities to grow and succeed that I was given,” he said.

Away from work, Erdmann has also been very proactive in his community, serving on the Village of Germantown’s Zoning Board of Appeals, Planning Commission, and School Board.

And as change is always a constant, he sees others doing great things after he is gone.

“I see myself continuing in this role for five or more years,” he said. “Then I’ll get out of the way and let someone else take over.”

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2015 Mental Health Summit focuses on women Veterans

By Gary J. Kunich

Women Veterans will be the focus of the 3rd Annual Mental Health Summit, July 22 at Marquette University. The summit is a collaboration between mental health professionals at Milwaukee VA Medical Center, Marquette and the community to better serve women who served in our country.

This year’s theme is “Leave No Woman Behind: Connecting Women Veterans to Resources.” The free event takes place 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. in Marquette’s Grand Ballroom and features guest speakers and breakout groups to discuss issues.

The event is open to mental health providers, community groups, Veterans and family members to learn about services VA offers and provide feedback on the medical center.

“One of the reasons this is so important is sometimes our female Veterans are not recognized or remembered. People have an image of a Veteran as just a man, and that’s a huge misnomer,” said Michelle Watts, a social worker in VA’s homeless program, and an organizer for this year’s event. “We have some agencies out there who don’t know we provide services for women. We have some women Veterans who don’t understand what we offer here.”

Watts said the summit will also include information on non-traditional mental health services such as art, music and equine therapy.

“Our message is always that we are open and want people to trust us with our care,” she said. For more information or to sign up by July 1, call Sandy Rice at 414-384-2000, ext. 41673, or e-mail at Sandy.Rice@va.gov.

**Father Norm rides into sunset**

Chaplain chief ends nearly 25-year VA career

By Gary J. Kunich

The first thing you see as you enter the Rev. Norman Oswald’s office is the “Lombardi Avenue” magnet on one of the doors, a nod to his past as the Green Bay Packers official priest.

There’s also a “Far Side” cartoon showing the acts of God — God juggling, tap dancing, playing the saxophone, and getting shot out of a cannon.

They’re all part of an eclectic collection of more than 100 gifts that dot the office and sum up his personality, and they all have a story from his 43 years as a priest.

Now the Milwaukee VA chief chaplain has added one more chapter to the story — his farewell.

Oswald — better known as Father Norm to parishioners, colleagues and friends — retired April 30. He celebrated his last Masses April 25 and 26 at the VA chapel.

Father Norm said he hoped to stay a bit longer, but failing eyesight due to macular degeneration pushed up his timeline.

“My vision started getting blurry back in August 2014. I was diagnosed and referred to a specialist to at least slow the process. But by Thanksgiving I realized it was going to be time to retire if I couldn’t work up to my own standards. I have very mixed emotions,” he added. “I’m going to miss the Veterans and my coworkers. You can’t be in one place 24/7, sometimes five or more years, “ he said. “Then I’ll get out of the way and let someone else take over.”

The achievements he’ll remember most are the annual bike over.

Father Norm said he’ll stay active in retirement and will volunteer at St. Therese Catholic Church on Blue Mound Road, and may spend time at the Community Resource and Referral Center.

“But I’ll get out of the way here and let the next person leave his mark,” he said.

The achievements he’ll remember most are the annual bike

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“But I’ll get out of the way here and let the next person leave his mark,” he said.

The achievements he’ll remember most are the annual bike
There's always so much going on at the Milwaukee VA, it's impossible to contain it to just a few stories and pages. Here's a round-up of special events. The Army Field Band (top photo) plays a combination of rock, R&B and country March 25 in Recreation Hall as a special concert for volunteers and employees to kick off Volunteer Appreciation Week. Lois Anderson, Green Bay VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic volunteer (center photo) is all smiles after winning a door prize at the April 15 Northwest Ambulatory Care Volunteer Recognition Banquet at the Swan Club in DePere. The banquet was held to honor all of the volunteers who give of their time in our Appleton, Cleveland and Green Bay Clinics. Veterans Benefits Administration regional director Duane Honeycutt (Bottom photo, left) and Robert Beller, Milwaukee VA Medical Center director, listen to concerns from a Veteran at the March 7 Town Hall meeting in the Matousek Auditorium. More than 60 Veterans attended the event, which was held for the first time on a Saturday. The next Town Hall takes place on a Saturday — 9 to 11 a.m. June 13 in the same location.

In and Around the Milwaukee VA, Part II
PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): Rachel Linskens from New Berlin West High School participates in the annual Work Shadow program organized by the Able-Disabled Committee. A total of 40 students from more than 20 schools participated March 12 in the event. Just to make you appreciate spring, Dave Turner from Facilities Management keeps a campus walkway clear after our last snowfall. Contractors peer up toward the sky as they hoist a new American flag above the East Entrance. The new flag is now in place at the East Entrance. It is usually replaced about every two years because of wear and tear from the weather.
In and Around the Milwaukee VA, Part III
PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): Lindsay Focht, part of the raptor program at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center, shows off Valkyrie, a bald eagle during a demonstration April 9 to about 30 Operation Hope Veterans in Building 43. Focht and her team were here to talk about volunteer opportunities at the nature center, which is located in Milwaukee. Because the bird pictured isn’t quite 4 years old, it doesn’t yet have the telltale signs of a bald eagle. Rabbi Levi Emmer leads Jewish Veterans in prayer during the March 31 Passover Seder in Recreation Hall. A student from the Wauwatosa West High School performs a piano solo for Milwaukee VA volunteers at the Volunteer Appreciation Banquet. Barbara Gilbert, homeless outreach program manager, shows reporter Nathan Imig from Radio 88Nine around the Community Resource and Referral Center.

In and Around the Milwaukee VA, Part IV
PHOTOS (Clockwise from top): Ken Peterson breaks out a little accordion music during a special April 17 breakfast for volunteers. Frank Busalacchi gives directions to a Veteran at the front of the hospital. Larisa DeZayas and Claire Seefeldt of the Vision Clinic are all smiles April 9 at the annual Occupational Therapist Open House fair in Recreation Hall. Dr. John Hayes, associate chief of staff for clinical affairs and other Spinal Cord Injury Center staff, toured a delegation of Croatian visitors on a tour March 5 of Milwaukee’s Spinal Cord Injury Center.
Employee of the year

Friendly smile is Sgt. Kiana Johnson’s weapon of choice

By Gary Kunich

It can’t be easy being Sgt. Kiana Johnson of the Milwaukee VA police force. But she makes it seem that way.

When she’s not working here, she’s busy baking treats for her side business, "Simple Cakes," or running one of her three boys to football practice. She doesn’t do nothing that, she’s serving as Racine County supervisor for district 2, where she sits on committees such as public works, parks and recreation and youth and governance.

And she’s always smiling. That’s what everybody says, from the police chief to Veterans she chats with in the hallway. Now she has something more to smile about.

Johnson was named Milwaukee VA’s 2014 employee of the year.

She received the surprise Feb. 13 at the employee of the year luncheon that honored all 12 top employees from 2014.

"I wasn’t expecting that at all," she said. "I think I just kind of went numb and cried a little. I just always try to be nice to people. I try to treat them the way I would want to be treated."

Photo by Benjamin Slane

Sgt. Kiana Johnson does a patrol of the medical center while working the night shift.

Two hours past her shift, she wasn’t giving up.

"I just want to help her and it’s so frustrating," she sighed. "You can tell she wants to talk. I don’t know if she’s afraid or if it’s something else.”

While running between her desk and the Emergency Department to try to help the woman, more Veterans and employees fill the medical center.

"Hi, Kiana," says a Veteran leaning against the wall, talking to another police officer.

"Hi, Braxton, how are you?" she said.

Despite the extra hours and exhaustion on her face, Johnson managed a smile.

"You know it’s my birthday in three weeks, and you know what I want?" he asked.

"Banana pudding?" she said.

The Veteran said Johnson is one of his favorite police officers.

"She’s not just good, she’s real good," he said. "Whenever I have a problem, she has something more to smile about.

Continued from Page 10

See Kiana

Kiana

Continued from Page 10

have a problem, she goes far beyond what she needs to do. She gives good advice.

If I have to get to an appointment, she helps me get there. She always makes sure I’m taken care of,” Johnson said it’s all part of building those relationships.

"I know he wants banana pudding for his birthday because that’s all he talks about," Johnson said. "That’s part of building the bond. We talk and we listen." For days later, while walking the halls, she stops to chat with the valets parking cars and another Veteran sitting in a wheelchair looking at posters on the wall. "Have you been fishing yet this year?"

Police and other staff spent hours trying to communicate with the woman to no avail. She still wouldn’t talk and wouldn’t eat.

As more police came on duty, they started searching all the camera feeds. Johnson repeated the information again and again. It’s good to do that, to keep everybody informed. And maybe someone comes up with something we haven’t thought of yet," she said.

At the same time, police sent her fingerprints to the FBI national database, and took her photo. They searched through hours of video footage from cameras set up throughout the campus, but police came up empty-handed after 10 days.

"She came in from the direction of one of the out buildings on the campus near Flower Drive, from the center of our property, so we sent officers out to search the area and see if she could find any clues," said Police Chief Tim Jantz.

That’s where officers found some ripped up scraps of paper. One of the scraps had a woman’s name on it, and police determined that woman was in a county jail. VA police sent over a photo to the jail and the jailed woman was able to identify the young woman in the picture. She told police the woman who showed up at the Milwaukee VA actually lived with her sister and another man near the campus.

Next, local police visited the home and found the name of the woman as well as her parents. The woman, who has a history of mental illness, disappeared from her parent’s home several months before, and family had been looking for her.

The Veteran’s face lights up as he talks about the fish he caught not too long ago.

Johnson put that into action with training classes March 5 where she helped lead 11 other police officers through different techniques to work with patients who might be agitated or having a mental health crisis.

"I want to reiterate, we are not commitment experts," she told the group. "It’s not our job to decide if someone needs to be hospitalized. We are mediators. Sometimes we are advocates. For instance, sometimes a Veteran comes into the Emergency Department, gets frustrated and doesn’t want to speak to the nurse. We don’t want to upset them further. We can talk to them."

A couple weeks later, Johnson puts those words into action. Working a 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. shift, she was only a couple hours from getting off work when a young woman came to the police station at 3:35 a.m. The woman was barefoot, her feet were muddy and her clothes were tattered, but she didn’t say a word. Johnson spent the next five hours alternately trying to find out who she was, while working with nurses and talking soothingly with the woman.

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Continued from Page 11

See Kiana

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Johnson started her career in Air Force security police for five years, worked as a corrections officer, then came to VA in 2009.

"This job is so much different than working in corrections," she said. "Here it’s about building relationships with the people you meet. That’s what I love about the job."

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It took about 12 hours to confirm her identity.

The unknown woman, 25 years old, was kept overnight at the medical center to determine which medicines she was prescribed after speaking to the parents. By the next day she was speaking and interacting with staff, and eventually left with her parents.

"I’m really proud of all of our guys, who never gave up on this," Jantz said. "It was a phenomenal effort by all involved."
Curling gives Vets traction

By Benjamin Slane

Curling consists of sliding 38- to 44-pound granite rocks across a 120-foot span of ice called a sheet. If one of the team’s eight stones, through curling the stone on the ice, stops in the house, it is scored. A game generally consists of eight to 10 iterations or ends.

The world of adaptive sports is fast growing in the Veteran world. Sports like curling are adapted to accompany various types of physical injuries. For instance, the curling stone is generally pushed across the ice with the body, but there are adapted sticks designed to fit the stone. Then, the Veteran may remain seated or stand. “This is a lot of fun,” said Marine Veteran Harry Ibis. “This is just like bocce ball and I like it.”

Ibis said some wheelchair-bound people have a difficult time engaging in their community. The curling club is an outlet. He likes to pay it forward by encouraging other people to give it a try. “It is just very encouraging, and gets us out in the community,” he said. “It is relieving to do this, and do this with other Vets who understand.” And that is where the laughter comes in.

Although rules require quiet, for this group of Vets, tradition is all but thrown away. The idea of participating in a sport long thought to be only for the able-bodied makes it more exciting. It doesn’t always go as planned. One VA nurse who was participating with the Veterans launched the rock from his hip onto the ice. It looked like he was throwing a bowling ball instead of using finesse. The rock landed with a thud and ice chunks flew. The Veterans looked at each other and burst into laughter one again.

A member of the Wauwatosa Curling Club, Allen Miller, volunteers his time and reserves the ice for the Veterans every couple of weeks. He smiles at the group of Veterans lauding each other after a few perfectly landed shots.

“They’re the best of the best,” he said. “I do this out of respect for those who served.” Miller said. “For the physical limitations those Vets have, it is rewarding. Not only rewarding to share with everyone, but especially to share with Veterans.”

Interested in recreational therapy programs? Talk with your primary care provider or social worker.

On the edge of happiness

By Benjamin Slane

“Just beautiful,” said Sharkey, “just beautiful.”

Sharkey, an Army National Guard Veteran, suffered debilitating back injuries that prevented upright skiing at the ski hill where he once instructed. On

Continued from Page 12

See Ski

Jim Sharkey rides up the ski lift at Wilmot Mountain with members of Adaptive Adventures. Sharkey, a Veteran, last used upright skis in 2010.

Community resource fair

Event offers one-stop-shop for Veterans

By Benjamin Slane

More than 500 veterans, community members and VA staff visited the 3rd Annual Veterans Resource Fair at the Milwaukee VA Medical Center in April.

The fair, organized by social work students from local colleges, provided information on programs to the community and Veterans. It was a one-stop-shop on topics ranging from homeless initiatives to job skills.

The purpose was to connect Veterans with community agencies who are Veteran-friendly and inform VA staff and other community members of existing organizations.

“This seems very comprehensive,” said Dan Gomez. “There are programs here that I never even knew existed.”

Gomez is an Air Force Veteran who came across the fair through an online Milwaukee VA listing. He didn’t leave empty handed from the fair.

“I found some really good info on (the University of Wisconsin’s) flexible program based on competencies. This is something that will work for me.”

This year, more than 40 organizations were on hand, double the number from 2014. “This is a huge benefit for Veterans. All these community and VA resources under one roof in a user friendly environment,” said Katie Gustin, a UW-Milwaukee social work student who works at the VA.

“As a social worker, it is my job to link Veterans with these resources. I really think Veterans deserve the best we can possibly provide.”
A dietitian will always tell you to “taste the rainbow” when it comes to fruits and vegetables (No, Skittles do not count). Mottos to live by might also include, “Everything in moderation,” “Small steps equal big changes,” and, vastly growing in popularity, “Meatless Mondays.”

While staples like macaroni and cheese, tuna noodle casserole and cheese pizza may suffice, they are sometimes unhealthy options. Fish or tofu can be a great substitution, but few consumers think to look toward the beloved mushroom as a meat alternative. Mushrooms are extremely versatile and can be finely chopped and used as a ground beef alternative in spaghetti sauce. Or try roasting button or Bella mushrooms in the oven with a little olive oil, sea salt, and pepper for a quick and healthy appetizer. Among many uses, mushrooms can also be made into burgers.

Now, I know what you are thinking: “Where’s the meat?” Consider the health benefits of eating meatless one day a week (or more, if willing). If prepared well, meatless meals may be lower in sodium, fat, saturated fat and cholesterol. As a meat alternative, mushrooms are low in calories and sodium, rich in potassium, fat-free, and naturally contain Vitamin D. They provide B vitamins that provide you energy to break down fat, protein and carbohydrates. Mushrooms also contain antioxidants that aid in supporting your immune system.

Whether you grill, bake, or sauté, consider cooking mushrooms in bulk. They may be frozen and will keep for up to one month. Then, add mushrooms to any recipe as a substitute for ground beef. Regardless of your health-conscious motives, challenge yourself to try a meatless Monday, and try Portobello mushroom burgers as your endeavor to bring a little healthy into your week.

You can do it! As a matter of fact, this recipe came to us from a meat-loving Veteran.

Recipe of the Month

Portobello Mushroom Burgers

Yield: 4

Ingredients:
4 Portobello mushroom caps, stems removed
¼ cup olive oil
1/8 cup balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons Italian seasoning
1 garlic clove, finely chopped
Salt & pepper, to taste

Directions:
1. Preheat grill or oven to 400ºF.
2. Combine olive oil, balsamic vinegar, Italian seasoning, and garlic in a small bowl. Add salt and pepper to taste.
3. Marinate mushroom caps in olive oil mixture for 15-20 minutes or overnight.
4. Place mushrooms on a preheated grill for 8 minutes. Flip, and grill an additional 8 minutes. (If baking, place mushrooms on a baking sheet prepared with non-stick cooking spray. Bake for 10 minutes on each side.)
5. Serve on a whole-grain bun (or white, if preferred) with provolone cheese, lettuce, and tomato.

*For a twist on the traditional burger, try adding a small spread of pesto to each burger with a handful of arugula.

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Employee of the month

March 2015
Holly Clanton
Registered Nurse

“She is considered an expert in the Palliative Care/Hospice field and is used as a mentor and resource for many nursing staff on Heroes’ Corner. Veterans, families and staff often complimented her for all of her care, concern, consideration, expertise and follow up.”

Employee of the month

April 2015
Josh Boticki
Medical Management Specialist

According to Boticki’s nomination package, “Without Josh, many of us would have extra work or less time, which could then impact the services we provide to Veterans. His actions and work help to make the Milwaukee VA a more efficient and effective workplace.”

In Service

Congratulations to the following Clement J. Zablocki VA employees who reached career milestones in April and May 2015:

35 Years
James Dembowiak
Kaye Evans
Deborah Kornblum
Charles Johnson
Kristine Stephens
Sara Voss
Susan Wimmer

30 Years
Floyd Combs
Ana Fierro
Joe Hughes
William Schmeling

20 Years
Essie Barnes
William Berger
Kulwinder Dua
Eva Manchester
Mary Moat
Lori Radliff
Mary Regozzi
Sharon Russ
Cheryl Thomas

15 Years
Robert Lapp
Larry Lipson
Eric Milisner
Irene O’Shaughnessy
Marisa Straub

10 Years
Kevin Bostick
Lynette Boyd
Jerome Brzycki
Sherrell Burrage
Marcy Gliszczinski
Scot Godager
Toby Green
Kimberly Grimmer
Mary Beth Krause
Gary Linson
Laura Pennert
Michael Potter
Julie Putman
Bernd Remler
Tom Schroeder
Susan Stabo

VA VOICES

Which artist do you wish to see at Summerfest?

Jean Qualler,
Voluntary Service:
“The Doobie Brothers!”

Enrique Aguilera, PSA for RECC:
“Definitely would like to see Shinedown.”

Benie Kalongo, CNA, Heroes’ Corner:
“Michael Smith, because he is just so good!”

Millie Suarez, CNA in Heroes’ Corner:
“Prince because he is old school!”

Steve Dominguez, nurse, Heroes’ Corner:
“Would love to see Jimi Hendrix, he rocks the old school.”