Amazing Volunteers Receive Seal Awards

DAV Seal Award winner Mary Ann Keckler, right, and Tampa VA medical center director Kathleen Fogarty welcome women veterans. (Photo by VA photographer Ebby Talebi)

Mary Ann Keckler of Valrico, Fla., and Patricia Davis of Oak Creek, Wisc., have been selected to receive this year’s George H. Seal Memorial Trophy for their amazing work as volunteers providing exemplary service to veterans. For years, they have given helpful and compassionate care to thousands of ill and injured veterans and their families.

“Keckler and Davis are outstanding representatives of the hardworking, dedicated DAV and Auxiliary volunteers who donate thousands of hours of special care and kindness at VA medical facilities across the nation,” said National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson. “They are committed individuals who are truly appreciated by our veterans.”

“What is remarkable about these volunteers is that they have
their own health and physical problems, but they push them aside to give veterans the care and support they need and deserve,” said National Headquarters Executive Director Marc Burgess. “Each volunteer has a particular reason to serve veterans, but they all will tell you that they want to thank veterans who have sacrificed for our freedom.”

The awards are conferred each year in memory of George H. Seal, who was DAV’s Director of Membership and Voluntary Services and a leading organizer and administrator of the VA Volunteer Service program from 1952 until his death in 1977. The presentations will be made Aug. 4 at the 91st National Convention in Las Vegas.

Keckler, a member of Chapter 67 in Brooksville, Fla., is a Navy veteran who served from 1959 to 1962. She will receive the DAV Seal award for her volunteer work in the spinal cord injury, polytrauma and recreational therapy units, as well as for organizing special events at the Tampa VA medical center. During the past 15 years, she has amassed more than 5,700 hours volunteering seven days a week, using a motorized wheelchair to get around the sprawling hospital.

“Seeing the smile on a veteran’s face gives me my greatest thrill,” Keckler said. “It means I’ve accomplished something for them. That smile means everything.”

Her motorized wheelchair takes her to “every nook and cranny” of the hospital, including areas where veterans are very seriously ill or injured. “I go everywhere with a smile on my face and never take it off,” she said. “I never let them see signs of concern.”

The spinal cord injury unit has special meaning for Keckler. Her son, Robert, is an Army veteran who requires full-time care after being paralyzed in a diving accident while on military leave in 1987. She spends every evening caring for her son, but the days are spent helping other veterans. “I get
the greatest satisfaction of my life from volunteering,” said Keckler. “I realize that my volunteering is making a difference.”

Mary Ann serves with passion and a tenacity that ensures veterans and active-duty service members and their families receive the best care,” said Tampa VA medical center Voluntary Service Program Manager Camilla Thompson. “As a veteran, she has a great appreciation for the sacrifices our veterans and active-duty service members have made for our freedoms. She shares their job and their pain.”

Davis, a member of Unit 19 in Milwaukee, Wisc., has volunteered more than 21,000 hours during the last 12 years. She will receive the Seal award for her work with the Transportation Network, serving as a recreation volunteer and chairing the VA Voluntary Service Executive Committee at the Milwaukee VA medical center.

“Patty is so giving,” said VA Voluntary Service Program Manager Denise Jashinsky. “She has a heart of gold. Whatever the need is on the Palliative Care-Hospice Unit, she’ll find a way to fulfill it.”

“I feel that veterans need to know we have someone who cares for them and to help them any way we can,” said Davis. “It gives me a great feeling that I can help the people who sacrificed to obtain our freedom.”

Volunteering is very special for her. “It warms my heart,” Davis said. “I am making a difference in a person’s life by helping them, and I will do whatever I can to help.”

Davis averages 45 hours a week at the VA medical center. As Transportation Network coordinator, she has 152 volunteer drivers who drove 402,000 miles transporting 16,131 veterans and donated 38,888 hours behind the wheel last year.

“If Patty didn’t do what she does on a daily basis, the
veterans would have a difficult time getting to their medical center appointments and back home, or might even cancel because they would have no means of transportation,” said Jashinsky. “She has done so much for veterans and their families. We’re so very proud of her.”

“DAV and the Auxiliary also are proud of Keckler and Davis,” said Wilson. “They do a remarkable job lifting the spirits of veterans who are facing critical medical issues.”

“Without question, both of these Seal award recipients have earned this recognition,” Burgess said. “They are setting a standard for other volunteers to achieve. They are providing the leadership that DAV and the Auxiliary seek in all those who represent us.”

“I wouldn’t be able to accomplish what I do without the help of DAV and all the Chapters and Units in Florida,” said Keckler. “I only have praise for our National Service Officers who have helped me 100 percent. Volunteering isn’t a one-man show.”

“I hope I’ve changed the lives of veterans,” said Davis. “I’m grateful to my volunteers and drivers. I’ll do this until I can’t do it anymore.”