

Meet the Veteran and Family Advisory Council 2012

Fe Castaneda

Fe Castaneda, originally from San Francisco, California, entered the US Air Force in June, 1979. Ms. Castaneda served in the U.S. Air Force for 16 years, including two tours in Japan, a tour on Clark Air Base, Philippines, and a tour in Saudi Arabia (Desert Storm). She also served at Travis Air Force Base, California; Kuwait; Bahrain; Fujairah, UAE; Diego Garcia, British Indian Ocean; Cubi Point NAS, Philippines and Jakarta, Indonesia. She and her husband, Carlos, (US Navy Veteran and a VAPAHCS employee), reside in the Central Valley and have two sons living in California. Both sons graduated from California State University, Stanislaus; a son receiving a BS in Business Administration, while the other a BS in Computer Science. Under the Reduction in Force Program in 1995, she retired from the Air Force. Ms. Castaneda is a 100% disabled veteran, who enjoys working at Livermore Division as a volunteer for the last 10 years; continuing to serve those who served. Ms. Castaneda joined the Veteran and Family Advisory Council in January, 2011.

John Castro

John Castro is originally from Detroit, Michigan, and was raised in Marine City, Michigan. He completed his GED tests while in Advanced Individual Training (AIT) in the US Army. In AIT, he graduated Water Purification Specialist with the second highest score ever recorded for that military occupational service. He went to Vietnam in October 1968 for a year's duty. In October 1969 he experienced symptoms of schizophrenia, and was hospitalized at Valley Forge General Hospital. He returned to duty after three months, and a year later he was transferred to Germany where he experienced more symptoms of schizophrenia. He volunteered for electro-shock treatments at Valley Forge, and was honorably discharged. The Veterans Administration awarded him 100% service connected disability. He was unable to work until 1990 when the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed. In 1993 he earned a Certified Nursing Assistant certificate, and worked at various hospitals and nursing homes in Contra Costa County. He was hospitalized again in 1999 at the Palo Alto VA, and was again awarded 100% disability. He attended CTC (Community Transitions Center) at the Menlo Park VA where he learned of peer counseling. He went to the college of San Mateo and earned a peer counseling certificate, and began working with people with severe mental illness at Caminar where he retired in August 2011. When asked if he would be interested in being on the Veteran and Family Advisory Council, he said yes. Mr. Castro joined the Council in January, 2012.

Maria DiGregorio

Maria DiGregorio was born and raised in the Philippines with an American citizenship. Maria left medical school to migrate to the U.S. in 1971, with her father who was a U.S. Army Veteran of WWII. She entered the USAF after working for a few years in a semi-conductor company. Her military career was cut short after marrying and giving birth to a quadriplegic daughter. She then pursued a career in the computer field and spent 22 years in systems development and support and project management as an employee and an IT consultant. She took a leave of absence to take an active role in the care of her ailing parents. After her father died on October 22, 2010, at the PAHC, she continued her involvement in the care of the veterans by volunteering in the 4C unit where her father died. She has two daughters who gave her four beautiful grandchildren, the treasure of her life. Maria re-married an Italian gentleman who has 5 children of his own and whom shares her passion for the beauty of nature which he captures through travel and photography. Maria and her husband also love to participate in ballroom dancing. She loves gardening and spending time with friends and loved-ones. Maria with her endless energy to contribute and collaborate is driven to get involved to make a positive change. Ms. DiGregorio joined the Council in January, 2012.

James Grinnell

James "Jim" Grinnell was born in California and has lived in the western United States for most of his life. He graduated from Redondo Union High School, and received a B.S. degree in Engineering from Oregon State University, a M.S. in Industrial Administration from Purdue University, and a Master in Health Administration from Suffolk University. He is also a Certified Financial Planner. At Oregon State University, he was introduced to military service through the required Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) classes. He was a Distinguished Military Student & Graduate, and opted for the US Army Signal Corps, serving two years on active duty with the Army's Air Defense Command as an electronic warfare and communications officer. He served an additional four years in the reserves. Most of his career was in real estate, finance, & management consulting. As an owner-builder, he built houses, industrial shops, offices, a mini-mart, and a motel. Currently, he lives in Sonora; served as vice-chairman of the Tuolumne County Commission on Aging, and was recently appointed to the state's Area 12 Agency on Aging. He helped found the county's Senior Fair Expo, several non-profits, and does grant writing & volunteering for worthy causes. He is actively helping an inventor build machines to help screen people with the goal of preventing blindness. Jim joined the Advisory Council in January, 2012.

Bill Harris

Bill Harris grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and worked in construction before entering the U.S. Army in 1976. Mr. Harris served in the Army for twenty years, including two tours in Germany, a tour in Hawaii, and two tours in Korea. He also served at Fort Carson, Colorado; Fort Monmouth, New Jersey; Fort Hood, Texas; Fort Ord, California; Fort Benning, California; and Fort Lee, Virginia. Presently, Mr. Harris lives in Sunnyvale, CA with his wife, Lauretta, and his granddaughter. He has five children and eleven grand-children, whose ages range from 9 to 21 years old. Two of his sons live in Denver, Colorado and three sons live in California. Mr. Harris enjoys relaxing and hanging out with his grandchildren, watching sports and reading. He is unable to work due to a disability; however, he likes to participate in volunteer work and help

out in the community, as much as possible. Mr. Harris has spoken to staff about his experiences at VA Palo Alto and serving on the Veteran and Family Advisory Council. In addition, he volunteers regularly in the Prosthetics Department, and will be participating on the Veteran Health Education Committee. Mr. Harris has been a member of the Veteran and Family Advisory Council since January, 2010.

Peter W. Lee

Peter W. Lee, born in London, UK, was raised in New York. He graduated from Phillips Academy, Andover and subsequently attended Princeton University, then transferred to Stanford University and graduated with a B.A. Later, he graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute with an M.S. in Quantitative Management. Nine months after becoming a US Citizen, Mr. Lee was commissioned Ensign in the U.S. Navy and served in Vietnam; he was later recalled for Desert Storm. As a line officer he had successive commands from Lt. Commander up to the end of his Naval career. He retired a Captain (O-6) after 30 years of service. In civilian life, Mr. Lee became a line and executive manager for the Bell System and AT&T, and retired early. He was later re-employed as a Corporate Headquarters Vice President for Catholic Healthcare West, a 55 hospital multi state system. He is presently retired and has been married for over 45 years to his wife, Mea. They have two daughters; one is a physician with two wonderful children, while the other is a Stanford Business School graduate working for Google, married and expecting her first child in 2012. Mr. Lee is interested in golfing, skiing, gardening, and volunteering. He volunteers regularly at the Coffee Mess in the VA Palo Alto Hospital. As a member of the Advisory Council, Mr. Lee has spoken to Surgical Residents at VA Palo Alto and been a member of a panel at VA Palo Alto's Management Retreat. He has served on a subcommittee providing revision suggestions for a patient handbook and has been a member of the Veteran and Family Advisory Council since January, 2010.

Nicola Liu

Nicola Liu, originally from London, UK, has lived in the USA for almost 5 years. She is married to a U.S. Marine, whom she met while in college. After finishing her graduate school, she worked for a large banking corporation, in project management. Unfortunately, her career was cut short due to her husband, Derek, suffering a severe brain injury, following heart failure. Her connection to the VA Palo Alto started in 2007, when her husband was admitted, while still in a coma, to the Polytrauma Emerging Consciousness Program. After regaining consciousness, he was in full time rehabilitation (moving from ward 7D on to Polytrauma Transitional Rehabilitation Program.) She has been his primary caretaker throughout this process, and will always have some association with the VA, as her husband will need ongoing therapy. In her spare time, she enjoys rock climbing, knitting and watching movies. Currently, Ms. Liu works part time for a Venture Capitalist in Palo Alto. She has volunteered with the VA MOVE! Program and been on a panel at the Management Retreat at VA Palo Alto Health Care System. She also shares her experiences of caring for her husband and ways staff can be more patient/family centered at New Employee Orientation and in a short video that is shown to all new staff. Ms. Liu is the Family Lead Advisor for the Veteran-Family Centered Care Simulation Communication Project at VAPAHCS. She has been a member of the Veteran and Family Advisory Council since it first began in January, 2010.

Barry Rose

Barry Rose, born in Philadelphia and raised in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, has always had an interest in "making" things with his hands, ranging from drawings to various constructions/models. In 1953, Mr. Rose joined the U.S. Army, and was sent to the Ordnance School at Aberdeen, where he became an instructor in vehicle repair. After service, the GI Bill supported his four years at the University of Pennsylvania, where he learned the academic side of mechanical engineering. Being an engineer during a technologically revolutionary time allowed him to make significant contributions to the current technology base. In addition to many jobs and many interesting projects, Mr. Rose devoted five years to doctoral studies in mechanical engineering. Later, he returned to work for Hewlett Packard in several divisions, the last of which was spent in product design of fiber optic transceivers. Since retirement, Mr. Rose has travelled to Europe and New Zealand. He has also begun to sketch, and learned a marvelous software program that does solid-body modeling. Recently, he is pleased to have learned about international women's health and human rights. As a member of the Advisory Council, Mr. Rose has spoken to Surgical Residents at VA Palo Alto and been a member of a panel addressing Executive Management. Mr. Rose served for a year as a Veteran Advisor on the Veteran Health Education Committee, presently serves on the ARC (Avoiding Readmissions Collaborative) Team, and has been a member of the Veteran and Family Advisory Council since January, 2010.

Travis W. Runnels

Travis Wright Runnels grew up in South Lake Tahoe, California and entered the United States Army in early 2002. After completing training for mechanized infantry, Runnels was stationed in Germany. While on active duty, Sgt. Runnels was deployed three times, including once to Tikrit, Iraq in 2004, as a dismount team leader. Six months into the Iraq deployment, Sgt. Runnels was involuntarily reclassified as a Chaplain's Assistant, a role that has proved to be helpful in his continued community outreach. In 2005, he was recognized by the Pentagon for excellence in his field, for his superb organization and support hosting an international conference. Sgt. Runnels was stationed in multiple locations while he attended several different military specialty schools before completing his service in the Army at Fort Lewis, Washington. Currently Mr. Runnels is a full-time student, President of Canada College Veterans Club, small business owner, and is involved in multiple community service organizations. Mr. Runnels lives in Redwood City, California with his partner, Matt, who works at Google. In his free time he enjoys backpacking, hiking, and any type of explorative travel with family and friends. In the past, Runnels has volunteered with such organizations as: Outward Bound, Veterans of Foreign Wars Association, Dali Lama – Seeds of Compassion, Muscular Dystrophy Association, Cascade Community, and KEXP FM radio. Mr. Runnels joined the Council in January, 2012.

Mike Ryan

Mike Ryan was born and raised in El Salvador. His father was originally from the United States, and Ryan lived in the Bay Area for a few years as a teenager. Today, Mr. Ryan is often asked, "how come this Irish guy has a peculiar accent..?" and it is because Spanish was his first language and he did not learn English until he moved to the Bay Area. He later graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, as an architect, and now runs his own practice. He has been married for 28 years to Malena, with no children. Currently, Mr. Ryan lives in San Francisco, in the Sunset District, about one mile from the Pacific Ocean and enjoys the cool fresh air he gets all year round. He also enjoys photography, reading good novels, walking the streets of San Francisco, and attending his local YMCA on a regular basis. Although Mr. Ryan did not serve in the military, his father, Gerald Michael Ryan was a World War II army veteran, stationed in the Pacific Island of Iwo Jima in 1945. His gratifying experience with the Hospice Unit in his father's care prompted Mr. Ryan to give back to the VA by becoming involved with the Advisory Council. Mr. Ryan has served on the Veteran and Family Advisory Council since its inception in January, 2010.

Blair Whitney

Blair Whitney, a South Bay native of California, currently resides in Palo Alto and recently completed graduate school at San Jose State University. Mr. Whitney served in the U.S. Army Reserves for six years, including a Title 10 activation and deployment after 9/11, when his entire Infantry Company was called up and assigned to Force Protection at Fort Huachuca. He has benefited from the Palo Alto VA Health Care Systems excellent care and services, which he discovered after leaving military service with his Honorable Discharge in 2003. Since then, Mr. Whitney has participated in the Homeless Veteran Reintegration Program at the Domiciliary Service (Menlo Park campus) in 2005-06, and continues as a volunteer, supporting veterans at the program. Currently, Mr. Whitney works as a researcher for the Mineta Transportation Institute on issues relating to Bike and Pedestrian Infrastructure in the urban setting. His hobbies and interests include local politics and government, bicycle advocacy and recreational riding, and gardening. Mr. Whitney helped create a short video about the Advisory Council that is shown to staff in New Employee Orientation. He presently serves on the Veteran and Family Centered Care Steering Committee, co-chairs the Veteran and Family Advisory Council, and has been a member since it first began in January, 2010.