

Organization Helps Veterans Help Themselves

(NAPS)—New programs are helping thousands of U.S. veterans who do not have sight realize a brighter future.

According to government sources, there are over 93,000 blind veterans living in our nation today. Sadly, statistics indicate that only half of them take advantage of, or even know about benefits that are available to them.

These benefits can help veterans who have been blinded, through difficult times, as was the case with Jerry Ellis.

Ellis is a blinded veteran who ran a roadside restaurant with his wife, Helen, near the coal mines of West Virginia. “My life has never been better,” says Ellis, who received a medical discharge from the Marines in 1969 after losing a lung.

Jerry’s happiness, however, did not come easily. It, “like most things worth having” according to the veteran, had to be worked for.

In 1989, Ellis developed a brain tumor which caused him to lose his vision. He was unable to work, and his family was forced to get by on his modest VA pension.

Shortly after losing his vision, Ellis fell into a deep depression, “Why bother, I felt,” Ellis explains, “I couldn’t work, I couldn’t find my way around the house, I couldn’t even get myself a glass of water.”

Programs advocated and supported by the Blinded Veterans Association (BVA), specifically Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) comprehensive blind rehabilitation services, helped Jerry change all of that. The rehab program helped him learn how to live a fulfilling and productive life without sight.

The program, conducted at various locations throughout the U.S., helped him with everything from the basics: crossing streets safely; to the more complex: coming to terms with his condition and dealing with life without vision.

It was, in fact, during his stay in the West Haven, Connecticut VA Rehab Program, that Jerry Ellis felt the inspiration to start his restaurant business. “I stood for a moment inhaling the rich, earthy smell of the vegetable gar-



It is estimated that more than half of the blinded veterans in the U.S. don’t know that they are eligible for a number of special services and benefits.

den, and it reminded me of the smell of Momma’s kitchen from so long ago.” From that point on, Jerry knew he was going to open his restaurant and that nothing would stand in his way.

The BVA traces its roots back to World War II and a group of veterans who lost their sight during the conflict. In 1945, they met at an army hospital in Connecticut and founded the Association. The organization has been instrumental in spearheading and helping to sustain programs and services meant to give aid to blinded veterans ever since.

For example, the organization has field service offices throughout the country that provide advice, information and aid to blind veterans and their families. BVA field reps, all of whom are blinded veterans themselves, counsel blind veterans in their respective regions.

The reps link veterans with services, rehabilitation, training and other benefits. In addition, the BVA helps veterans who receive counseling to find and hold on to jobs within the community.

There is no charge for any BVA service and all legally blind veterans are eligible for assistance regardless of when they lost their vision—during service or, as in the case of Jerry Ellis, afterward.

For more information, visit www.bva.org or call toll free 1-866-322-4500.