

A Working Partnership

VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program teams with nonprofit, faith-based and community organizations to change lives.

Carl Walker was hesitant about starting a new career at age 54, but the self-employed contractor who specialized in remodeling apartments and homes knew that type of work was hard on his body.

"With my back problems and bad knees, the job was becoming a little too much," said Walker.

Walker realized that he had come to a fork in the road and decided to turn to VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) program, whose primary mission is to help veterans who have service-connected disabilities become suitably employed, maintain employment, and achieve independence in daily living.

Walker, a Marine who spent a brief stint in Vietnam, traded hanging drywall for a managerial job at a Goodwill Industries retail store in the Atlanta area.

A quick study with a strong work ethic and winning personality, Walker excelled in the training program. In just four months, he went from being an intern in Goodwill's job resource training center to a permanent position as lead facilitator. Last December, Walker applied for a managerial position and he is now assistant manager at a Goodwill retail store in Covington, Ga.

Walker credits his success to his VR&E counselor. "I really appreciate what Roderick Cole did for me," he said. "He did not hesitate if someone was moving a little slow—he would contact them."

Cole worked diligently with Walker to develop a vocational reha-

bilitation goal. Various tests administered by VA and Goodwill revealed that Walker is customer service-oriented and "has a lot of people skills." Walker embraced Goodwill's values: respect, stewardship, ethics, learning and innovation, and in no time he attracted management's attention.

"After I got out of the Goodwill program, they would bring me back to be a motivational speaker," he said. "A lot of guys came in there saying, 'I don't think this program is going to help me.' So I tell them, 'Hey, look at me. I was sitting down there in that same seat where you are sitting. I moved up one step at a time, but you have to want to do this.'"

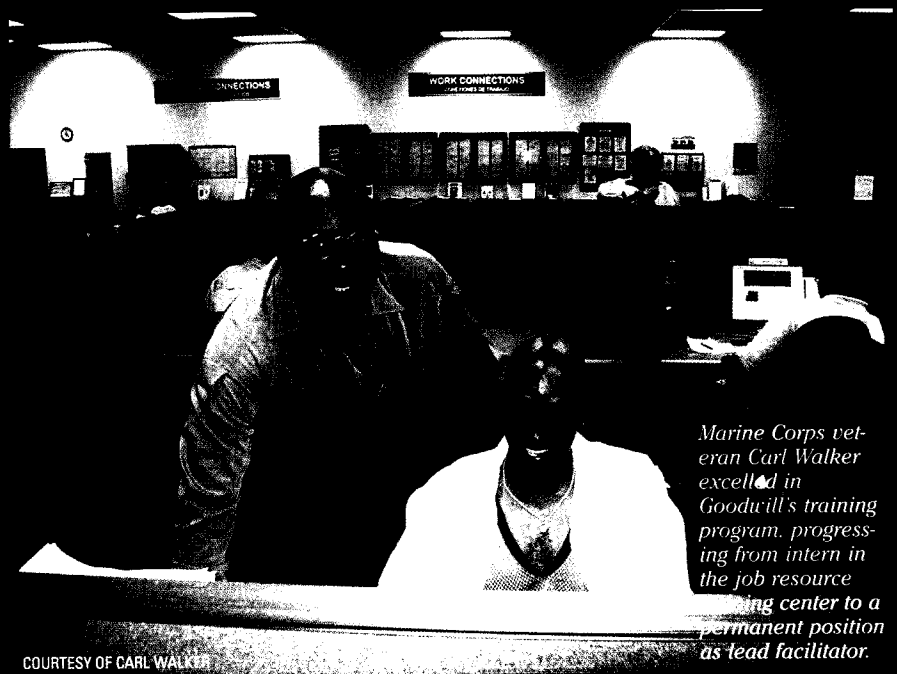
Walker knows that Goodwill is more than clothes and furniture. Last year, the international organization

that's been "putting people to work since 1902" provided employment and training services to more than 930,775 people, according to the organization's Web site.

Goodwill works closely with VR&E providing client services, evaluations, skills training and jobs.

"Goodwill has a long history of being associated with veterans since World War I," said Eric Olson, director of Workforce Development for Goodwill Industries International. "We believe our soldiers have a strong work ethic, and we reinvest those skills in the workforce. It is a good practice to support veterans."

In 2007, Goodwill, which has a network of 184 independent, community-based organizations in the U.S., Canada and 14 other countries, re-



Marine Corps veteran Carl Walker excelled in Goodwill's training program, progressing from intern in the job resource training center to a permanent position as lead facilitator.

COURTESY OF CARL WALKER



Navy veteran Shawn Hall, an assistive technology navigator for Easter Seals, works with Shawn Hall, a traumatic brain injury client.

EASTER SEALS

played an important role in his ability to move from one job to another so easily.

He said the program "made me more employable," allowing him to "bridge the gap by going back to school to get a degree" in business management and information systems.

"VR&E's Chapter 31 program is probably one of the best programs around for a veteran with a disability who needs to rekindle or re-sharpen their tools to go back to work," he said.

Todd Nichols is a purchasing manager for Habitat for Humanity in Jacksonville, Fla. The 20-year Navy veteran finds his new job to be a perfect fit compared to his last job at a for-profit business.

"I didn't like the business ap-

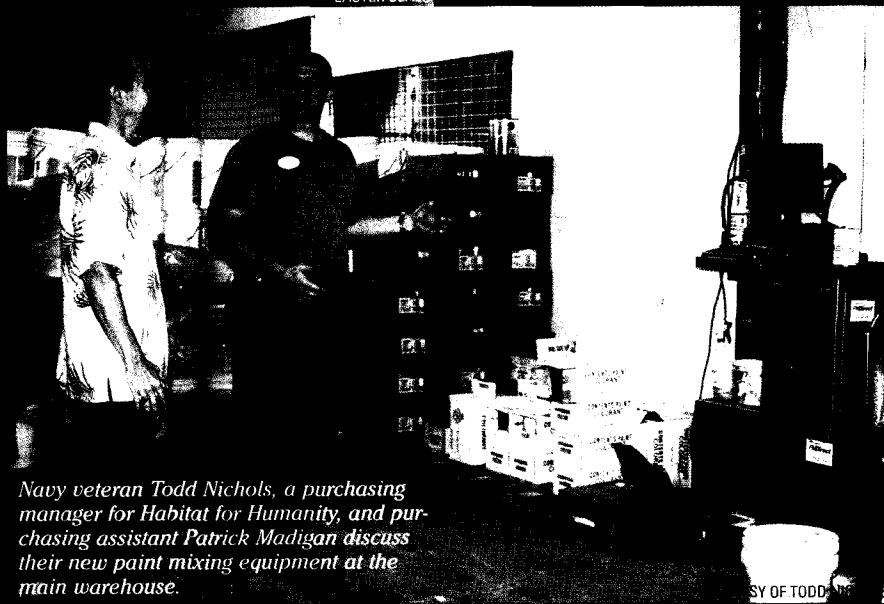
ceived the first-ever VetSuccess.Gov Award from VA in the faith-based and community employer category. "It was a wonderful honor, an unexpected honor," Olson said. "We value [partnerships] and are proud to talk about that."

"If somebody would have told me two years ago that I'd be in the position that I'm in today, I don't know if I would have believed them," Walker said. "I'm thankful for the program and that VA and Goodwill collaborated."

Twenty-year Navy veteran Walter Hall is an assistive technology navigator for Easter Seals of North Texas in Fort Worth. The former naval photographer worked as a case manager assisting Hurricane Katrina victims before coming to Easter Seals in December 2006, where he demonstrates assistive technology for people with disabilities.

"Our mission is to create an opportunity that will advance the independence of individuals with disabilities or special needs," said Hall.

In January, Easter Seals launched a nationwide campaign to help veter-



Navy veteran Todd Nichols, a purchasing manager for Habitat for Humanity, and purchasing assistant Patrick Madigan discuss their new paint mixing equipment at the main warehouse.

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ans returning from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq suffering from traumatic brain injuries. The organization has been helping veterans with disabilities for nearly 90 years through job training and employment services. They help veterans learn skills to successfully enter the workforce, or to return to work after an illness or injury.

Hall believes that divine intervention, coupled with his military background, training and education,

proach of that company, so I fired them," he joked.

As a worship pastor while in the Navy, Nichols wanted to work for a company where he "could be a blessing to other people," instead of focusing on profits and a company's bottom line.

"It's very gratifying working for Habitat," said Nichols, whose Jacksonville location builds about 100 homes a year, using a combination of

Putting Veterans to Work Serving Their Communities

VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) counselors help eligible veterans develop an individualized plan and select from one of five employment tracks: reemployment; rapid access to employment; self-employment; independent living services; and employment through long-term services.

"Every service-connected disabled veteran who applies to our program is provided a comprehensive vocational evaluation conducted by a professional rehabilitation counselor," VR&E Director Ruth Fanning explained. The VR&E counselor identifies the veteran's interests, aptitudes and abilities, conducts a needs assessment, develops detailed rehabilitation plans with various employment options, and helps the veteran implement a customized employment plan.

The VR&E program and VA's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (CFBCI) are working together to strengthen and expand partnership opportunities to better serve veterans looking for a new and rewarding career.

In an effort to help disabled veterans find jobs, VA created FBCI = VetSuccess, a program designed to encourage nonprofit, faith-based and community organizations to form partnerships with VR&E. Currently, VR&E partners with more than a dozen nonprofits and faith-based and community organizations to provide service-connected veterans with the training and skills they need to compete in today's competitive job market.

"For decades, faith-based and community organizations have provided assistance, support and help to America's heroes," said Darin Selnick, director of VA's CFBCI. "We work with a variety of nonprofits, faith-based and community-based groups, veterans service organizations and foundations across the country to fulfill VA's mission."

In 2005, the FBCI = VetSuccess program debuted with the announcement that VR&E and the YMCA of the USA developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and

formed partnerships with YMCAs in Montgomery, Ala.; Seattle; Detroit; St. Louis; Atlanta; Indianapolis; St. Petersburg, Fla.; and Oakland, Calif. (Sacramento location). The MOU cemented a partnership that had been in existence for several years. VR&E has also signed MOUs with Disabled American Veterans, Goodwill Industries International, and Jewish Vocational Services.

"Faith-based and community organizations can participate in FBCI = VetSuccess by hiring and identifying service-connected disabled veterans within their organization and community that are unemployed or under-employed or may need supportive services and inform them about this initiative," said Selnick.

Nonprofit, faith-based and community partners provide a variety of services, ranging from building homes to providing job training to the disabled and handicapped, and much more. One of the newest partners is Hire Heroes USA, a national nonprofit organization providing career placement assistance to disabled Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans.

"Employers continue to recognize the untapped labor pool in VR&E. Faith-based and community organization employers are hiring our skilled VR&E veterans who are dedicated to a new mission of serving their communities," said Fanning. In fiscal year 2007, faith-based and community organizations hired 673 VR&E veterans, earning an average monthly income of \$2,662, compared to 591 veterans in fiscal year 2006 with average monthly wages of \$2,580, and 362 in fiscal year 2005. Both the number of employers and the number of veterans invested in the program nearly doubled between fiscal years 2005 and 2007.

To learn more about VA's VR&E program, go to: www.vba.va.gov; for more on VA's Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, go to: www.va.gov/fbc or call 202-461-7689.

vendors and volunteers, and is ranked the second largest Habitat affiliate. Responsible for an approximately \$8.5 million purchasing budget, Nichols started out as construction superintendent and was promoted to purchasing manager about six months later.

"My Navy experience taught me a lot about managing people, materials and budgeting, but I didn't have any experience as a purchasing manager," he said. "This program has given me an opportunity to grow and

learn skills that would have been very difficult for me to learn in a profit-sector construction company. I would have needed to show up there with the skills that I've been able to learn on the job here."

Nichols recently completed a Master of Business Administration program with an emphasis in Public Administration.

Habitat for Humanity International has built more than 250,000 houses worldwide, and provided more than 1 million people in more than

3,000 communities with safe, decent and affordable shelter.

Although Walker, Hall and Nichols are geographically separated by hundreds of miles and have vastly different careers, the trio shares a common bond—the VR&E program. All three applied for the program not knowing where the road would lead them. But to their delight, the journey has been rewarding and life-changing. **VA**

By Wanda D. Patrick