

VA secretary observes 'Miracle on Mountainside' at disabled vets clinic

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SNOWMASS, Colo.— After two days of watching disabled veterans fence and rock climb, joining them in a game of sled hockey and trying out an adaptive "bi-ski" during the 20th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson said he understands why people call this event the "Miracle on the Mountainside."

"The miracles take place in people's lives" as they discover capabilities they never dreamed they had or would have again, Nicholson told American Forces Press Service during an interview recently.

The program, jointly sponsored by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Disabled American Veterans, is open to U.S. military veterans with disabilities ranging from spinal cord injuries and orthopedic amputations to visual impairment and neurological conditions. As they learn adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing and get introduced to rock climbing, scuba diving, trapshooting, snowmobiling, and sled hockey during a six-day program, the veterans' eyes get opened to a whole new world of opportunity, the secretary said.

"You see this transformation of the human beings who have come here and done these things," Nicholson said. "The people who have been slouched in their wheelchairs thinking, 'I can't do that,' or, 'I can no longer do that,' with the emphasis in their



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Veterans Affairs Secretary R. James Nicholson, left, joins disabled veterans for a game of sled hockey at the 20th National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, at Snowmass Village, Colo.

lives on what they can no longer do, are transformed into realizing, 'I can do that,' and, 'I do do that.' And it gives them a whole new outlook on what they can now do."

Nicholson got a firsthand appreciation of that metamorphosis recently as he watched veterans learn to compete in wheelchair fencing, a new event at the Winter Sports Clinic. "You could just feel the transformation," he said. "You see them saying, 'This is something I can do.'"

Similarly, as he joined in a sled hockey game, Nicholson said it was exciting to get a feel for the veterans' sense of competition and teamwork. "I don't know who invented that (sport), but I would like to give them a huge hug," Nicholson said. "Here we have

these veterans, who can no longer walk or stand, sit down in those sleds and participate with tremendous vigor and enthusiasm. To be part of that was a special experience."

Nicholson said getting to try out a bi-ski, particularly as his two instructors lift him onto the chair lift to the mountaintop, gave him a personal appreciation of the uncertainty participants must set aside to participate in the program.

"That sense of fear that they must initially have and are able to overcome speaks of their character and their drive and their determination to do more," he said. "They're able to prove to themselves that they are still very capable people performing difficult athletic, competitive functions.

The participants aren't the only ones whose lives are changed, Nicholson said. By breaking down barriers and focusing on "the 'ability' that is still in disability," Nicholson said, these veterans are showing others with similar injuries what's possible.

He said it's heartwarming to watch the interaction between older veterans, some who have lived a long time with their disabilities, and younger veterans with more recent injuries, including those from operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. Younger veterans see what the older ones have accomplished and what they, too, can aspire toward. Meanwhile, older veterans realize that "it's never too late to grow and reach out and expand yourself," he said.

"There are so many positives (about this program)," Nicholson said. "It gives veterans a new sense of self-value, a new sense of their own athleticism and the growth you get from athletics and competing and being on a team and bonding with others and having enthusiasm and anticipation."

Nicholson said he's hopeful participants will leave here later this week changed from the Miracle on the Mountainside. "My number one hope is that they go home enlarged in their own sense of self-value and self-sufficiency from the challenges they have met and overcome and that they apply these lessons to their daily lives," he said.

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