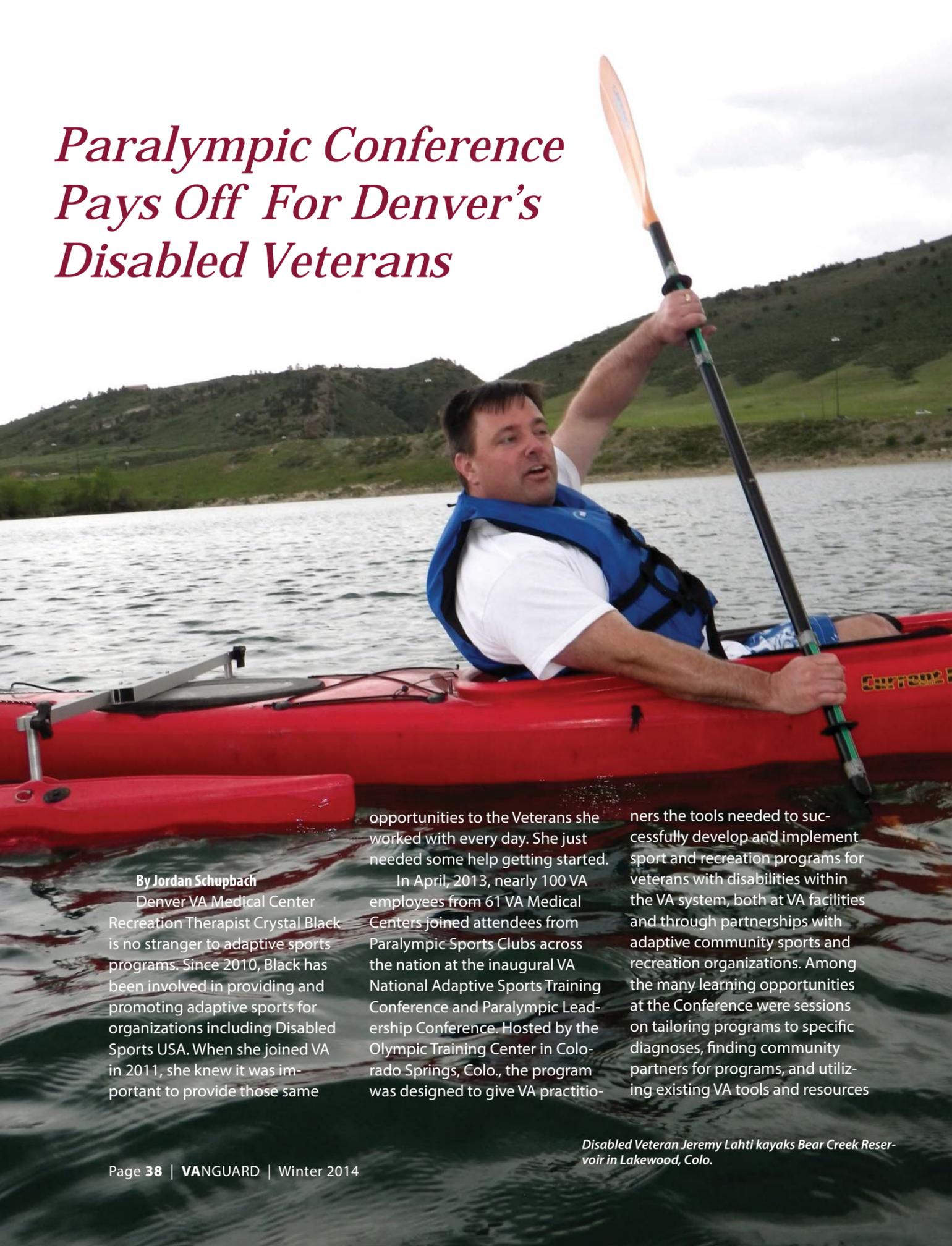


Paralympic Conference Pays Off For Denver's Disabled Veterans



By Jordan Schupbach
Denver VA Medical Center Recreation Therapist Crystal Black is no stranger to adaptive sports programs. Since 2010, Black has been involved in providing and promoting adaptive sports for organizations including Disabled Sports USA. When she joined VA in 2011, she knew it was important to provide those same

opportunities to the Veterans she worked with every day. She just needed some help getting started. In April, 2013, nearly 100 VA employees from 61 VA Medical Centers joined attendees from Paralympic Sports Clubs across the nation at the inaugural VA National Adaptive Sports Training Conference and Paralympic Leadership Conference. Hosted by the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs, Colo., the program was designed to give VA practition-

ers the tools needed to successfully develop and implement sport and recreation programs for veterans with disabilities within the VA system, both at VA facilities and through partnerships with adaptive community sports and recreation organizations. Among the many learning opportunities at the Conference were sessions on tailoring programs to specific diagnoses, finding community partners for programs, and utilizing existing VA tools and resources

to get programs started.

"The conference was really valuable in helping me learn about other VA medical centers adaptive sports programs' successes and challenges," said Black. "Being able to network with VA clinicians and Paralympic sport Clubs was vital when seeking feedback, guidance and resources for growing the Denver VA adaptive sports program."

Based on what she learned at the conference, Black designed a program that provides three levels of care based on each individual's assessment and treatment goals. The first level of care is direct referral to community-based adaptive sports programs for individuals who demonstrate safe and independent function in his or her community but may need help locating resources. The second level of care is 1:1 sessions to address safety or community transition needs. The third level of care is multi-week programs for those who need more advanced therapeutic intervention to allow for a safe transition into the community. These programs include skiing, snowshoeing, swimming, cycling and several other sports. Each program follows a progression toward maximum independence in that sport.

Black's program also engages community partners in a variety of ways, including providing access to equipment, coaches, training facilities and transitional resources.

"The ultimate goal for our adaptive sports programs is to successfully transition Veterans from VA care to community-based sports programs that align with



Navy Veteran Brian Halik takes a run with Rec Therapist Crystal Black.

his or her treatment goals," she said. "Working with community partners from the start makes that transition much more efficient and effective."

The Denver VA has served more than 150 Veterans in its adaptive sports program since it began. The 24-year-old U.S. Navy Veteran Brian Halik is one of them. Halik, an OEF/OIF Veteran who sustained a spinal cord injury, says he was told he would never walk post injury. Halik decided differently, however, and working with Crystal, has completed running and cycling programs and is now participating in a swimming program.

Halik says the program has made him stronger, healthier and more confident. "Just because someone tells you it can't happen doesn't mean it can't," he said. "Any Veteran who isn't active

should definitely check your local VA for these programs."

One key to the program's success was strong support from Denver VA leadership.

"Without the support from our Physical Medicine and Recreation Therapy Services Department, as well as from our Director's Office, these programs would not be flourishing and supporting so many Veterans," said Black.

But leadership buy-in wasn't automatic. Lynette Roff, the Denver VA Medical Center Director, was looking for something more. "In order to ensure that we were providing a program that was in line with VA's mission of providing excellent health care to the Veterans we serve, we needed the program to provide measurable, tangible health benefits," said Roff.

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To that effect, Black developed a series of assessments to track and report a Veteran's progress.

For each Veteran, a collaborative treatment plan with measurable goals is identified based on his or her barriers.

Veterans are responsible for directing their own care, starting with the safety assessment and continuing throughout the program. Following each session, each Veteran discusses progress with the Recreation Therapist and identifies any accomplished goals or new barriers.

Each program also includes an identifiable discharge plan following the first session. "We are constantly working toward transfer of care to the Veteran's home community," said Black.

For those that were unable to attend the Conference, Black

has some advice on developing or expanding. "I'd strongly suggest reaching out to your medical center leadership to find out what they would require to get program approval" she said. "We designed programs within our service, answered the questions we could and then reached out to others for the questions we could not answer before we presented the idea to the Director's Office."

And finally, Black emphasized that attending the Leadership Conference would be highly recommended for anyone who is starting fresh or looking to expand, as it provides the opportunity to gain a great deal of knowledge and networking opportunities in one spot.

"Once your program is up and running, make sure to pay it forward and share the information you gain with others looking to develop new programs."



Disabled Veterans participate in a handcycling clinic at the Denver VA Medical Center.