

# NEWS RELEASE

North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System | Office of Communication & Outreach



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## **Veteran overcomes physical challenges with the help of fitness clinic staff at the Malcom Randall VA Medical Center**

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*Army Veterans, Karen and Eric Hines workout together in the fitness clinic at the North Florida/South Georgia Veterans Health System's (NF/SGVHS), Malcom Randall VA Medical Center in Gainesville Florida.*

"I woke up one morning and felt off balance but didn't think anything of it. So, I got myself ready and headed off to work," said Army Veteran Eric Hines. "As I settled in at work, I began to feel pain in my neck and couldn't focus.

Shortly after, Hines was rushed to the emergency room at a nearby hospital and fell in and out of consciousness. Doctors worked quickly to try and figure out what was wrong as a dormant virus began to wreak havoc all throughout Hines' body.

"When Eric finally woke up, he was quick to say, "Don't believe anything they told you. Things will get better," said Eric's wife of 30 years, Karen Hines.

With the grim diagnosis of transverse-myelitis, (rare inflammation of the spinal cord

which effects the part of the nervous system that sends messages from the brain to the nerves and the sensory information back to the brain) Hines was determined to fight to keep being as active as he could.

“We’ve always been into fitness and loved working out since being enlisted. We would cycle 40 to 50 miles almost every weekend,” said Karen Hines. “So, when they told us that he might live out the rest of his life paralyzed, we began to look for solutions.”

The Hines’ found VA’s adaptive sports program and were eventually referred to the recreation therapy fitness clinic in Gainesville where they have worked to make incredible progress over the last five years.

“When I started working out in the fitness clinic, I couldn’t balance at all. I would drag my feet. They have really helped me to overcome a lot of my physical challenges since being diagnosed,” said Hines. “They encourage me to continue to try, live and function with my impairment which has helped me in the most impactful way!”

Fitness clinic staff have also been amazed by Hines’ determination and are inspired by the progress he has made over the last several years.

“It’s almost unheard of for someone with Eric’s diagnosis to come as far as he has,” said recreation therapy supervisor, John Mikula. “He has really been a role model to everyone in our clinic and we are still seeing improvements.”

Learning to incorporate exercises to improve his overall quality of life has been an ongoing process. Each week staff work to show Hines new ways to help strengthen his muscles. He can now stand on his own and even walk with stabilization.

“They don’t know why I’m able to move like this,” said Hines. “According to textbooks, I shouldn’t have the ability to move like I do. This kind of progress is a direct result of the fitness clinic and the incredible staff here.”

“We are very fortunate to have highly trained recreation therapy staff in the clinic with diverse backgrounds such as spinal cord rehabilitation and advanced fitness certifications in exercise physiology, strength and conditioning, and suspension training,” said Mikula. “The individualized programming is also a perk for those with these types of impairments.”

According to Hines, Veterans who work out in the fitness clinic are at all different levels of physical capabilities and no one is embarrassed by what they can or cannot do.

“We have fun in the fitness clinic but work hard,” said Karen Hines. “The comradery here is remarkable. We joke and encourage each other, and it helps keep everyone motivated to want to come back.”

Hines encourages everyone to give the fitness clinic a try.

“If you want to add 10 years to your life, come to this clinic. It’ll give you flexibility and provide you with a better quality of life,” said Hines. “You can only do so much on your own and here, we are all in this together.”

Interested Veterans can ask for a recreation therapy fitness clinic consult through their primary care provider.

The NF/SGVHS is one of the nation’s leading VA healthcare systems, employing more than 5,800 medical professionals and support staff dedicated to providing high-quality care to Veterans residing throughout North Florida and South Georgia. The organization operates 15 facilities, including two medical centers located in Gainesville and Lake City, a Domiciliary and 12 outpatient clinics located throughout a 50-county catchment area.

To learn more about the facilities and services offered by NF/SGVHS, please visit: <https://www.va.gov/north-florida-health-care/>, “like” us on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/VANFSG](http://www.facebook.com/VANFSG) or follow us on Instagram at [www.instagram.com/VANFSG/](http://www.instagram.com/VANFSG/) or Twitter at <https://twitter.com/vanfsg>.

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*“...to care for him who shall have borne the battle  
and his widow, and his orphan...”*  
- President Abraham Lincoln



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