

Awards Presented

The Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 75th Annual Convention in Las Vegas honored many outstanding individuals, PVA chapters and businesses for their dedication and support of PVA's mission to improve the quality of life for veterans and all people living with spinal-cord injury and disease. The following award winners were recognized during this year's convention:

**Fiscal year 2020
Speedy Award (member)**

Larry J. Dodson

**Fiscal year 2021
Speedy Award (member)**

Al Kovach Jr.

**Individual Giving
Patriot Award**

May Thom

Corporate Patriot Award

The Karyn and Richard
May Foundation,
United Access

**Harry A. Schweikert Jr.
Disability Awareness
Award**

Al Evans Jr.

President's Award

Colonial Chapter

**John M. Price
Most Outstanding
Chapter Award**

Colonial Chapter

**John M. Price
Most Improved Chapter Award**

New England Chapter

**Richard Fuller
Outstanding Achievement
in Government Relations**

New England Chapter

**Cliff Crase Award
For Professionalism**

William "Hodge" Wood

**Bob Webb Excellence
in Newsletter Award**

New England Chapter

Chapter Website Award

New England Chapter

**Membership
Development Award**

Vaughan Chapter

**Annual Chapter
Volunteer Service Award**

Colonial Chapter

**VA Volunteer
Service Award**

Diane Polensky,
Erie Department of Veterans
Affairs Medical Center

**Dwain Taylor Volunteer
Service Award (member)**

Michael Negrete,
New England Chapter

**Dwain Taylor Volunteer
Service Award (non-member)**

Letitia Simons, Iowa Chapter

Stephen Waxman, MD, PhD, of Yale University accepted a \$750,000 donation from Paralyzed Veterans of America via Zoom video conferencing.

while the national organization's Sports & Recreation program takes care of large-scale events, like the National Veterans Wheelchair Games. It'd be a five-year phased process with the first year focusing on program awareness and planning and the second through fifth years working on program delivery and evaluation.

Donations To HERL & Yale

Besides adaptive sports, a major component of PVA's focus is promoting research to find better treatments and cures for paralysis.

That's why, in recognition of PVA's 75th anniversary, the board and EC presented checks for \$750,000 each to Stephen Waxman, MD, PhD, founder and director of the Neuroscience & Regeneration Research Center at Yale University in Connecticut, and Rory Cooper, PhD, founder and senior researcher at the University of Pittsburgh Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL). Waxman says PVA's dollars are worth their weight



COURTESY OF PARALYZED VETERANS OF AMERICA



REBECCA TROHA

Thank You

At the close of May's Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) 75th Annual Convention in Las Vegas, a motion was made that, "The Board of Directors of the Paralyzed Veterans of America assembled at this convention directs the editor of *PN* magazine to publish in a conspicuous place ... a thank-you quoting the sincere appreciation and gratitude of the members of Paralyzed Veterans of America to the ladies and friends of PVA, without whose help and support we could not have accomplished all that we have this week."

in gold and that PVA gives Yale researchers the gift of a mission. He discussed the center's research involving the discovery of a master gene and sodium ion channel called Nav1.7 that are responsible for chronic pain, as well as using DNA to create targeted drug therapies for individuals who experience chronic neuropathic pain and genes that may confer pain resilience.

"Yale does not use the word partner casually, but it regards PVA as a full partner, and that reflects the immense respect that everybody at Yale has for PVA," Waxman says. "I used to say that we may be able to develop new therapies for neuropathic pain. I'm now able to say we will be able to develop much more effective, nonaddictive therapies for chronic pain."

With the help of PVA's donation, Waxman says his near-term goals are to get a proof of concept in humans for a Nav1.7 blocker that can be tooled up to a larger study and to capitalize on the center's findings in people who are resilient to pain to develop a proof of concept for a drug targeting those genes in humans, as well.

Cooper, who's been involved with PVA for over 40 years, gave an overview of some of HERL's immense body of work, including the SmartWheel manual wheelchair evaluation tool, development of clinical practice guidelines and waterproof power wheelchair called the Pneu-Chair. Cooper says PVA's support allows HERL's researchers to tackle problems for which they couldn't obtain federal funding.

"One thing that's unique about PVA is it actually is the only veterans service organization that has a program that supports research development and clinical practice guidelines," Cooper says. "And not only does it benefit our members tremendously, it benefits Americans with disabilities tremendously and benefits actually everybody in the world tremendously because technological advances and scientific advances that PVA

has funded have transformed everybody's lives for the positive, which I don't think PVA gets adequate credit for."

Cooper says short-term goals for HERL include improvements in power mobility; reducing the risk of pressure injuries, especially among those who've had them previously and are prone to repeat surgeries; and creating better interfaces for those with high-level SCI, ALS and MS to effectively and naturally communicate and control devices.

Reflecting on PVA's 75-year history, Cooper says the organization's impact on both paralyzed veterans and on America itself is amazing.

"If you think about it, cars, adaptive vehicles are largely coming out because of paralyzed veterans," Cooper says. "Architectural barriers, the original laws from California and other states came out because of paralyzed veterans advocating for it. Even the disability rights movement didn't really catch, you know, the [Rehabilitation] Act of 1973 was critical, but it wouldn't have probably been as successful and would have taken years longer if veterans hadn't gotten engaged and PVA taken a leadership role. The Americans with Disabilities Act ... Because veterans can get the ear of Congress and that can change things."

For more stories and video interviews from the convention, visit pnonline.com or facebook.com/pnmagazine. ■



Rory Cooper, PhD, founder and senior researcher at the University of Pittsburgh Human Engineering Research Laboratories (HERL), discusses HERL's work.