

2017: BVL Celebrates 75 Years of Service to America's Veterans

In 1942 America, the war effort was in full swing; individuals and organizations were coalescing around the troops, and one unique organization was being formed by a favorite American sport: Bowling.

Seventy-five years ago, officials representing every facet of the sport of bowling met to coordinate efforts to support the troops—bringing together all the sport's integers to provide the most complete approach to the campaign. Thus, BVL, then known as “The Bowlers Victory Legion” was born.

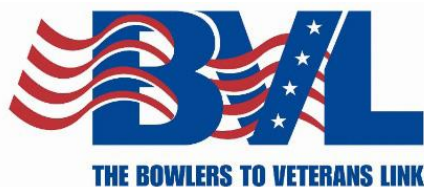
Subsequently, A.L. “Ebby” Ebersole was appointed as BVL's first Administrative Officer and oversaw BVL's beginnings: The first projects focused on improving morale for troops overseas and insuring that wounded servicemen receive appropriate and timely healthcare. To support morale, BVL directed the delivery of 400,000 decks of playing cards, 325,000 sports guides, almost 100,000 fishing kits, and a variety of sports equipment. Additionally, three medical evacuation planes were purchased to ferry the wounded home from the battlefields of Europe—known as the “Wings of Mercy” project.

When the war ended, BVL leadership recognized that the need to support those who have served our country was more important than ever and thus renewed their mission of recreation and health care for hospitalized veterans.

BVL then began working alongside the forefathers of today's recreation specialists. In an interview with an acknowledged pioneer in the field for the Department of Veterans Affairs, Dr. Bernath Eugene Phillips, writer Jeff Mansfield quoted Phillips recalling work for

the VA in 1945, “The BVL was one of the first (organizations) that I got associated with when I went to Washington ... we used the BVL and started a bowling tournament among all VA hospitals. The first BVL tournament was held in 1947 and seven of the 31 VA hospitals were entered. (Former BVL Executive Director) A. L. Ebersole deserves the credit (for bringing this recreation therapy to the veterans).”

In 1947, the Director of Athletic Service of the Veterans Administration (VA) James E. Pixlee wrote



this about BVL, “It is impossible to overstate the value of the aid afforded by the BVL.”

When Ebersole retired in 1974, BVL had earned recognition as a leader in recreation therapy for veterans. That distinction was only furthered under the guidance of the National Bowling Council in the ensuing years, which assumed the task as administrator of the sport's charity.

In 1996, when the National Bowling Council disbanded, the BVL Committee voted to organize as an independent entity, with Elaine Hagin at the helm.

“BVL has evolved in its structure over the years to keep pace with the changing nature of veterans' health care and recreation therapy techniques, as well as changes within our sport,” explains current

BVL Board of Directors Chairman John LaSpina.

“BVL was created through the unity of all members of the sport of bowling,” continues LaSpina. “That was the reason for our success. We want and need to get back to our roots. Thanks to our new campaign to encourage bowling center operators to participate in the BVL effort through ‘Care.Commit. Contribute.’ and to our innovative partnerships with industry corporate members, we're headed in the right direction. But there's much more work to be done.”

VA Secretary McDonald addressed the industry at Bowl Expo last June, attending the convention to personally thank the sport for its commitment to America's veterans noting, “Among our many partners, the Bowlers to Veterans Link stands out as a true pioneer. Years before Omar Bradley reached out to Americans to enlist their help in caring for Veterans, the bowlers of America reached out with a helping hand to America's Veterans and service members. There are a few Veterans organizations that have been helping Veterans longer than BVL, but I'd be hard pressed to name any other organization that has.”

LaSpina concludes, “We know we are doing great things for America's veterans—our services are truly valued by our partners at the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, in order to keep up with the tremendous need for recreational and therapeutic programs and services, we have to step up our game, and we're working hard to do just that.”