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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**WOVEN (Women Veterans Network) Welcomes State Veterans Affairs Representative**

(Bradenton, FL) Celia Szelwach, director and founder of the "WOVEN Women Veterans Network" has invited Larri Gerson, Veterans Claims Examiner and State Women Veterans Coordinator from the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs (FDVA) to speak on Friday, February 26<sup>th</sup> from 1130am to 100pm at Nicki's West 59<sup>th</sup> Restaurant. Ms. Gerson will share information and answer questions regarding development of claims and "VA and State Veteran's Benefits" for women veterans. Gerson was a pioneer as a Narcotic Patrol Dog Handler in the U.S. Air Force Security Police and served from 1977 to 1979 in San Antonio, Texas and Grissom Air Force Base in Indiana. She holds a Bachelor's of Science degree in Criminal Justice and a Masters of Human Services degree in Management.

During 2009, WOVEN accomplished several milestones:

- Communicated with and welcomed new members across the U.S. from Florida to California.
- Held nine educational meetings including VA benefits, financial planning, stress management, and local nonprofit services to support our Veterans and their families.
- Participated in several service projects:
  - Held Lioness Film educational outreach and women's health panel in May. Over 30 community members attended, and raised over \$250 for the Kirby-Stewart American Legion Post 24.
  - Sponsored a unit in Afghanistan with snacks and comfort items in November.
  - Participated in the Manatee County Veteran's Parade for Veteran's Day.
  - Sponsored gifts for 27 children of OEF/OIF military families for Holiday Festival Dec 13<sup>th</sup>.
- Supported other nonprofits by communicating, volunteering, or advocating on their behalf:
  - Grass Roots for the Troops <http://www.grassroots4thetroops.org/>
  - Jewish Family & Children's Services Operation Military Assistance Program <http://jfcs-cares.org/>
  - Sarasota Manatee Association for Riding Therapy (SMART) <http://www.smartriders.org/>
- Responded to inquiries from women veterans/their families referring them for services or other networks.
- Provided educational awareness to the media to raise awareness about the needs of women veterans.

WOVEN Women Veterans Network has members across the U.S and members include women veterans with more than 20 years of service in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Coast Guard as well as pioneers such as the first female Command Master Chief in the Coast Guard. WOVEN stays connected through monthly meetings, community service projects, phone calls and via an email newsletter which highlights VA health and benefits information specific to women veterans and community service programs for women veterans and their families. Celia Szelwach started WOVEN in May 2007 with the desire to create a global online community of women veterans spanning all services, experiences, war eras, ranks, and geographies. The group serves not only as a support network for current women veterans but also for future veterans, particularly those from the latest conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

For additional information about WOVEN or to receive e-mail updates, contact Celia Szelwach at 941.545.6383, email [cszelwac@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:cszelwac@tampabay.rr.com), or visit [www.womenveteransnetwork.org](http://www.womenveteransnetwork.org).

Celia Szelwach is a senior consultant and program manager for veterans' and women's health and founder/director of the Women Veterans Network (WOVEN), a global online community committed to helping women veterans successfully transition from military service. She was appointed by the Secretary of the VA to serve on the 14-member Advisory Committee on Women Veterans from 2006-2009 and currently serves on the Bay Pines VA Medical Center Women Veterans Health Committee. After graduating in the 10<sup>th</sup> class of women from West Point in 1990, she served as a Captain and senior paratrooper in the Army Transportation Corps. Her

active duty service from 1990-1995 at Fort Bragg, North Carolina included redeploying troops and equipment from Desert Storm/Desert Shield and two humanitarian service missions—for Haitian migration to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and for Hurricane Andrew disaster relief in Miami, Florida. Her awards and decorations include the National Defense Service Medal, two Army Commendation Medals, two Army Achievement Medals, two Humanitarian Service Medals, and the Senior Parachutist Badge.

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