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Wow! Spring came and went quickly, didn't it? Those few days last week were, as the kids would say, "awesome."

Everyone was smiling as they walked around in shirt sleeves trying to decide which to do first: store the snow shovels for the winter, or put the furniture out on the deck and dig out the sunscreen. But, as happens to all good things, spring disappeared into a gust of cold wind, and the sun went away, and we all started complaining about the long winter again.

Then I turned on the TV news and saw the flooding all around us, the tornadoes and fires south of us and the earthquakes and other catastrophes around the world, and I decided I had nothing to complain about.

Something else happened recently that reminded me of how fortunate most of us are. Because April is the month when National POW Day is commemorated around the country, a luncheon was held in the VA hospital auditorium on April 8 for the POWs from South Dakota, southwestern Minnesota and northwestern Iowa.

Several months previously, I had been invited to be the speaker for this special occasion. I regularly have speaking engagements around the area, but I had never had an invitation to be with a group of men who had lived through the prisoner-of-war experience, and I felt totally inadequate.

What could I possibly say? I couldn't begin to understand the experiences they had endured. I was in awe of them. Why had they asked me to speak when past speakers had included veterans and POWs like George McGovern and Leo Thorsness? It was hard to prepare for.

But I need not have worried. It turned into one of those serendipitous times when you learn that those who have come closest to death actually prize life the most. From the moment I walked into the VA hospital and met Phillip from Kimball, a Korean War POW and the only non-WWII POW in attendance, the mood was upbeat and celebratory. The crowd, who gathered in the auditorium around the decorated tables with their families

from all the surrounding states, were chatting and laughing together like a huge family reunion. The POWs, mostly in their 80s and 90s, were exchanging their latest news, telling stories about grandchildren and great-grandchildren and reminiscing about those who had died since their last party, including George and Bernie and Morris.

Warren from Rock Rapids, Iowa, whose wife had recently died, was there with his daughter and son-in-law from California. Being legally blind and having some trouble with hearing has not deterred him from living life to the fullest. He still lives several miles from town, and before his wife's death, he visited her every day for six years in the nursing home where she dealt with dementia. His spirit was inspiring, and it was an "upper" just to visit with him about current events as we ate our lunch.

Later, as I spoke to the group, we all had a good time exchanging stories about growing up in the '30s and '40s and laughing about the way the world has changed with all the technological advances.

I wish everyone could have had the privilege that I had that afternoon, of spending time with this resilient bunch of men who spent several years as prisoners of war. These aren't guys who live in the past. They value the present and the future and live it to the hilt in spite of the physical reminders of aging. What a gift they were to our country then - and still are.

I learned a lot that day, and I was again reminded that I really don't have anything to complain about.

Senior columnist Shirley Halleen, a former teacher, is retired. Email her at [shirlouh@aol.com](mailto:shirlouh@aol.com).