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America's newest national memorial will honor disabled veterans

Every year, more than 25 million people from around the world visit the National Mall in Washington, DC. The Mall is lined with important memorials, each honoring some of America's greatest heroes. And yet, none of these monuments recognizes the millions of disabled American veterans who have selflessly fought for freedom throughout our nation's history.

This will soon change. On Oct. 5, 2014, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial (AVDLM), the first national memorial honoring disabled veterans, will be dedicated. It opens to the public the following day. Within sight of the U.S. Capitol, this new national landmark will serve as a constant reminder of the cost of human conflict.

My own connection to the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is deeply personal. As a young singer I entertained our military coming home from battle. I was so touched by the young men and women whose lives would never be the same, I knew helping disabled veterans was something that would always be a priority in my life.

In 1998, DAV National Adjutant Arthur H. Wilson, the late Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown and I joined forces to create the Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation. My fondest wish was to honor the four million living disabled veterans, as well as those who are no longer with us, who have sacrificed so much for our country.

Since the Memorial's inception, a small group of dedicated men and women have worked tirelessly over the past sixteen years to turn the Memorial from an idea into a reality as a gathering place for veterans, their caregivers, families, and loved ones. I have been fortunate to be able to be a part of something so important. It's an honor to have personally donated to and advocated for our nation's disabled veterans—with both physical injuries and disabilities and "invisible" ones, such as post-traumatic stress disorder. It pays tribute to disabled heroes from all conflicts and each branch of the military, the first of the Washington monuments to honor such a broad and diverse group of Americans.

Physically, the memorial is designed to convey a combination of strength and vulnerability, loss and renewal. The story of America's disabled veterans is complex and multilayered, not easily told by a single statue or plaque. Not only does the Memorial cover more than two centuries of heroism and struggle, but also it includes the untold stories of the caregivers, family and friends of our country's wounded warriors. A star-shaped fountain and reflecting pool, surrounded by glass walls with embedded words and images depicting personal journeys of courage and sacrifice, serves as its focal point, mirroring the flickering light of a ceremonial flame.

Combining solemn reflection and a celebration of bravery and sacrifice, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial dedication will honor those men and women whose service and struggle, on and off the field of battle, remind us of the true price of the freedoms we enjoy every day.

Come October, for the first time, America will have place to pay tribute to some of our most courageous heroes – our disabled veterans. I encourage my neighbors here in South Florida, veterans from around the country and all those who wish to honor them, to come to the dedication ceremony on Oct. 5. The event is free and open to the public, but registration is required. For more information, please visit www.avdlm.org.

Pope is a philanthropist and co-founder of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, her private and charitable foundations have also provided awards for medical research, humanitarian relief, the performing arts, and animal welfare. She currently resides in Manalapan, Florida.

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