

Disabled veterans memorial has DC groundbreaking

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MIAMI – For South Florida philanthropist Lois Pope, the journey to create a memorial for disabled veterans began more than 40 years ago when she sang for Vietnam War vets at a rehabilitation center.

Pope made herself a promise that night, that if she could ever do something for disabled veterans, she would.

On Wednesday, Pope hosted the groundbreaking of The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. It will be within view of the Capitol on a 2.4-acre plot, across from the U.S. Botanic Garden.

Pope, a onetime Broadway actress and singer whose late husband owned the National Enquirer, said at the groundbreaking ceremony that she got the idea for the tribute when she learned — after performing for disabled veterans — that there was no permanent memorial in their honor.

"Long after the fighting on the battlefield ends, our disabled veterans continue to fight to reclaim their lives and readjust to society," Pope said.

"Far too often, they are marginalized and forgotten. This memorial will ensure that they and their sacrifices will always be remembered, while educating future generations about the human cost of war."

Pope, 77, of Delray Beach, said it took her about 14 years to see that promise through to fruition. It took her five months just to get the then-secretary of [Veterans Affairs](#), Jesse Brown, on the telephone. Then she partnered with the Disabled American Veterans and thus began the 24-step process of getting the memorial off the ground.

The nation has more than three million living disabled veterans, including 53,000 who served in [Iraq](#) and Afghanistan.

Congress passed a bill, which President Bill Clinton signed, allowing for the establishment of the memorial. Its design is a star-shaped reflecting pool with a surface broken by a single eternal flame. The site will be framed by glass and granite walls, representing both the strength and fragility of human spirit, she said. A grove of ginkgo trees beside the pool will signify the persistence of hope, she said.

Actor Gary Sinise, the star of TV's "CSI: NY" and the memorial's spokesman, said the tribute is long overdue. In the movie "Forrest Gump," Sinise's character, Lt. Dan Taylor, loses both legs in [Vietnam](#).

"We have various monuments and memorials to honor our fallen warriors from various wars, but there is nothing that has been done to pay tribute to disabled veterans," he said by telephone from Studio City, Calif. "They have to live the rest of their lives with the scars of the battle."

Sinise said America owes its veterans a great debt.

"It will never be enough. No matter what we do, we can always do more. You don't want people to get lost in the cracks or fall through the system," he said.

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) declined comment in advance of the groundbreaking.

Pope wants to officially dedicate the memorial on Veterans Day 2012, but she still has some fundraising to do. The price tag is \$85 million, all of which is private funds, including \$9 million of her own money. About \$10 million was donated by more than a million members of [Disabled American Veterans](#). She still has about \$2.5 million to raise. To help fill the gap, the group is selling commemorative coins from the U.S. Mint.

"The most ironic thing is that they built their own memorial," Pope said.

Art Wilson, head of DAV and co-founder of the memorial foundation, said the memorial is also important to educate citizens and lawmakers.

"It's there to remind our lawmakers every day of the service and sacrifice," he said.

So, ultimately, what does Pope want people to get out of a visit to the memorial?

"I want them to be grateful for the sacrifices of disabled veterans. I want them to come away with the feeling of gratitude and respect, and when they see a disabled veteran to go say 'Hi. Thanks for what you have done for our country,'" she said.