

Search for Survivors' Memorial Becomes Quest

- By [Gabe Starosta](#)
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Courtesy Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation

The monuments that give Washington, D.C., its character and sense of history have one thing in common: They all memorialize the dead. Soon, those monuments will be joined by what organizers are calling the first monument to honor the living.

Dignitaries broke ground on the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial last week on a 2.4-acre site adjacent to the National Mall. As its name suggests, the memorial — which organizers hope to dedicate in two years — will pay tribute not to those lost in wartime, but to those who have survived and been left disabled as a result.

The idea for such a memorial did not originate inside the military or the Department of Veterans Affairs. Instead, plans for a memorial honoring disabled veterans were drawn up by a wealthy Florida woman whose only connection to war was a cousin who was killed while serving in Vietnam.

Lois B. Pope, a member of the University of Miami's Board of Trustees and a philanthropist in South Florida, said in an interview that she came to Washington in 1995 to remember her cousin at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and found that something was missing.

"I asked a park ranger where the memorial for disabled veterans was, and he said, 'Lady, there is none,'" Pope said. "At that moment, that's when I decided what my life's purpose would be." Pope's admiration for disabled veterans stemmed from one particular day in 1967. At the time, she was working as a singer, and she performed for a group of injured veterans recently returned from Vietnam at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine in New York.

"I sang 'Somewhere' from 'West Side Story,' and there's a line that goes, 'Hold my hand and I'll take you there,'" she said. "As I sang that line, I happened to look down at a young man lying on a gurney who had no hands and no arms. His plight just hit me like a brick. It was such an emotional moment."

A decade ago, Pope brought that emotion to Washington, where she tried for months to pitch the idea to Jesse Brown, who was the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. The two eventually spoke on the phone, and Brown, who died in 2003, became an enthusiastic supporter of the project to recognize disabled veterans.

They were joined in 1998 by Arthur Wilson, a military veteran who is the national adjutant for a countrywide advocacy organization called Disabled American Veterans, and the Disabled Veterans LIFE Memorial Foundation was born. Its mission was to secure permission and raise money to build the memorial, and it soon picked up a national spokesman in actor Gary Sinise, who played the disabled Lieutenant Dan in the movie “Forrest Gump.”

Despite the group’s passion, the process of building the monument has been long and slow. The law that authorized the memorial — which was sponsored by four Congressmen with military experience, including Sen. [John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.) — was passed in October 2000. Since then, Wilson and Pope have devoted themselves primarily to fundraising and to presenting the plans for the memorial to various commissions. Those commissions that have the option of blocking the project for any number of reasons, including “not fitting into L’Enfant’s original plan for the city,” but the monument has been granted full approval, Wilson said.

The site designated for the memorial is located between Canal, C and Second streets Southwest, close to the Botanic Garden.

No federal money will be spent on the memorial, so the group has been raising private funds since 1998. At \$85 million, the group is about \$2.5 million short of the total needed, Wilson said.

The money has come from all kinds of sources. Pope donated more than \$8 million of her own money to the cause. Corporate sponsors such as Ford and AT&T have been generous, and former presidential candidate Ross Perot gave \$3 million to the foundation. The amount of Perot’s gift is significant: There are about 3 million living disabled veterans, and Perot gave \$1 for each.

Much of the rest of the money has actually come from disabled veterans themselves, Wilson said.

“In essence, disabled veterans are building and financing their own memorial,” he said.

A local firm, Michael Vergason Landscape Architects, designed the memorial, which will feature a star-shaped reflecting pool surrounded by a grove of ginkgo trees. The ginkgo tree was chosen because it is an international symbol of peace, and because it grows straight upward and stands stiffly, almost like soldiers watching over the space, organizers said.

Pope promised that although the memorial is meant to remember what veterans have sacrificed for their country, it will be inspiring, not depressing. In that way, it can take its place alongside the rest of the monuments on the National Mall that bring great pride to any American visiting the nation’s capital.