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A public tribute to war's disabled

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- It could be the best possible place for a memorial to disabled vets. Or, maybe, the worst.

A shady island of trees across from the national botanical garden, within clear sight of the Capitol. Engulfed by some of the busiest traffic in the capital, including access to Interstate 395, reverberating at rush hour with the roar and rumble of cars and trucks and the shrill whistles of traffic cops.

"It's not lost in some corner where it won't be noticed," says the memorial's main advocate, Lois Pope, 73, a member of a famous New Jersey family. "Members of Congress will be able to see it from their office windows."

Pope, widow of Generoso Pope Jr., owner of the National Enquirer, has pledged \$8 million of the estimated \$65 million in building and maintenance costs. She lobbied Congress for approval of the project and runs ads promoting it. Her son, Paul, recently sued her and other trustees of his father's estate, demanding a court-ordered accounting.

The ambiguity swirling about the memorial somehow fits. Pope's Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation began a fundraising drive just as revelations about poor conditions at nearby Walter Reed Army Hospital provoked questions about the national commitment to those disabled by war. It's almost as if the nation doesn't know what to think about America's 3 million disabled vets. Or even whether to think of them at all.

"We have to show these men and women that we care," says Pope, who lived in Englewood. "I don't think we've done a good job. One of the ways we can do that is with a memorial dedicated to those who are living with the disabilities caused by war."

Pope, who has performed on Broadway and starred in Paper Mill Playhouse productions, says she has been haunted by the injuries suffered by soldiers ever since she sang for Vietnam vets in a New York rehab facility.

"I sang a 'West Side Story' song with the line, 'Hold my hand, I'll take you there,' and I caught the eyes of a soldier with no hands. I almost couldn't go on."

Her husband was the son and namesake of the previous owner of Colonial Sand and Stone, a building materials firm, now called Colonial Concrete, located in Newark; Generoso Pope Sr. also owned Italian-language newspapers.

The younger Generoso Pope bought the New York Enquirer, according to a book by its editor, with money borrowed from his literal godfather, crime boss Frank Costello. He later moved it and his family to Florida and turned the paper into the successful supermarket tabloid that, in 1977, sold a record 6.7 million copies of one issue featuring a front-page picture of the dead Elvis Presley in his casket.

Generoso Pope Jr. died in 1988, and the newspaper sold for \$418 million. The family has made large contributions to Catholic colleges, including Fordham and St. Peter's College in Jersey City. The late Rev. Victor Yanitelli, a St. Peter's president, was a family friend.

In the mid-'90s, Lois Pope, who has given millions to medical, educational and arts institutions in Florida, befriended the late Jesse Brown, President Bill Clinton's veterans affairs' secretary, and won his support for a memorial.

"I had just assumed there was a monument honoring disabled veterans," says Pope. "I was shocked to learn there wasn't."

Clinton signed legislation authorizing the memorial in 2000, but the bill required it be built and maintained without public funds. Pope joined with the Disabled American Veterans, an organization that has pledged \$3 million to the project; the DAV's state affiliates and state veterans' affairs offices also are raising money for the project.

Actor Gary Sinise, who played a disabled Vietnam vet in the movie "Forrest Gump," has become a national spokesman for the project.

Nearly 900,000 -- mostly vets -- contributed to the memorial, and Congress also agreed to the minting of a commemorative coin, with sales going to the monument.

Rick Fenstermacher, who works for Pope's foundation, says two-thirds of the federal and local bureaucratic requirements for building a monument have been met. He says he hopes ground can be broken next year, the memorial completed by 2010.

"With a little luck, we'll be able to accelerate that schedule," he says.

The design by architect Michael Vergason is nearly complete. The memorial will be enclosed in marble and glass walls with as-yet-undecided inscriptions. The interior will include a grove of trees; a raised fountain in the shape of a five-pointed star -- each point representing a division of the military -- will spill onto a larger water table. The water will reflect both the nearby Capitol and an eternal flame in the center of the fountain.

"A place where people can come and reflect," says Barry Owenby, the project manager. He also managed construction of the larger World War II memorial.

The entrance, cut on a bias through the 12-foot marble wall, will require entering visitors to see the dome of the Capitol towering over the eternal flame of the fountain.

"That suggests that the people who sacrificed so much did what they did in the service of their country," says Owenby.

Lois Pope agrees with that assessment, but adds, "It also will require our lawmakers to see it and consider what these men and women have suffered.

"Maybe they will think twice before sending them to war again."

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