

American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial to honor heroes, caretakers

\$80 million outdoor monument near U.S. Capitol to be dedicated Oct. 5



remembrances: Worker Victor Bonilla pulls off protective material to reveal large glass panels of inscriptions at the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial in Washington. (Andrew Harnik/The Washington Times) [more >](#)

By Jacqueline Klimas - The Washington Times - Sunday, August 31, 2014

Despite never serving in uniform, [Donna Joyner](#) has felt the effects of the Vietnam War every day for the last 33 years.

Her husband, Dennis, is a triple amputee who lost both his legs and his left hand in a land mine explosion while serving in the Army in Vietnam. While [Mr. Joyner](#) earned the Purple Heart and Bronze Star for his service, his wife has received little public acknowledgment for her sacrifices, including quitting her job in 2008 to take care of her husband full-time.

Both will be recognized — he for his service to the country and she for her service to him — when the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is dedicated Oct. 5 on grounds just across the street from the Capitol.

“We all sacrifice a lot. We don’t live our lives the same as anybody else,” Ms. Joyner said. “I’ve given up an awful, awful lot, and I would do it again any time.”



Mr. Joyner serves on the board as secretary for the \$80 million outdoor memorial, which includes glass panels, etched with quotes and photos, and touchable bronze sculptures to offer a sensory experience to vets who may be blind. It will also feature a star-shaped fountain — one point for each of the five military branches — with an eternal flame hovering above the water.

The location, in a small street park on Capitol Hill, isn’t an accident.

“The veterans said we want to see the Capitol, and we want the Capitol to see us,” said Larry Kirkland, who carved the memorial’s sculptures.

The monument is completely accessible for veterans who may be in wheelchairs or on prosthetic legs, even including seven handicapped parking spaces right at the site. Instead of raised planters or dirt that could get compressed over time around the trees at the memorial, they are surrounded by a rubber mulch of shredded tires, which ensures an even ground for wheelchairs to pass over.

At a time when the quality of veterans' care is a major issue in the news, the monument seems prescient because, in addition to recognizing the vets, it honors those who have dedicated themselves to caring for them, whether they are professionals or family.

Even as President Obama and Congress vow to reform the VA to improve veterans' care from the official side, the private caregivers are also becoming a part of the debate.

Under current law, caregivers of post-Sept. 11 veterans receive a monthly stipend as well as counseling and travel expenses to be with a veteran during care.

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman [Bernard Sanders](#), Vermont independent, has written legislation that would extend benefits to all caregivers. That bill has yet to receive a final vote.

"If you're going to do anything for caregivers from 2000 on, you should do it for all of them, because we're all caregivers. Whether they're Korean veterans or World War II veterans, there's always been somebody there helping that disabled veteran," [Mrs. Joyner](#) said.

[Mrs. Joyner](#) said she often feels as though neither lawmakers nor the general public can truly understand what it means to care for one of the nation's wounded warriors day in and day out. While there are seemingly small daily actions, like reaching something on a tall shelf or pushing her husband's wheelchair, [Mrs. Joyner](#) had to take a major action in 2008 when she quit her job. From overuse of his one good arm, her husband had blown out his rotator cuff and needed surgery that would basically put him in "infant stage," unable to do anything for himself during recovery.

"I gave up my job, the income, any pension that I would have received. I will not get as much Social Security when I get to be that age because I had to leave and take care of my husband, because my husband was totally incapacitated, and we did not want him to go to a rehab facility, because he wouldn't get the care at a rehab facility that he would with me," she said. "That's where the compassion comes in."

Her husband's arm is still weak, and he's unable to do things like lift a pot to make himself lunch, so his wife continues to stay [home](#) and care for him full time.

The Joyners will [travel](#) to D.C. from Florida for the memorial's dedication. She said it means everything to her that she will be able to visit the memorial with her husband without the daily struggle he often faces to get around.

She also said she hopes the memorial's proximity to Capitol Hill reminds lawmakers that the true cost of war extends decades into [the future](#).

"Maybe the lawmakers will be reminded that this is what happens and [that] we deal with it every day," she said.