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Diane Musselmann: An important way to honor disabled vets

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By DIANE MUSSELMANN / Contributing Writer

Published: Sept. 25, 2014 Updated: 3:25 p.m.

Every year, millions of people from around the world visit the National Mall in Washington, D.C. 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, the first national memorial honoring disabled veterans, will be dedicated. It opens to the public the following day.

My own connection to the new American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial is deeply personal. My late husband, Kenny Musselmann, served in the U.S. Army in Vietnam where a land mine explosion and gunshot wounds resulted in the amputation of both of his legs. In an instant, our lives changed forever. Kenny and I made advocating for the rights of our disabled veterans a priority in our lives.

Prior to Kenny's, passing he became active in the Disabled Veterans' Life Memorial Foundation – a small group of dedicated men and women with a vision to create a gathering place in Washington, D.C. for veterans, their caregivers, families and loved ones. Though he is no longer with us, our work – my work now – is not done helping disabled veterans and their families. It has been my honor to take his place on the Foundation board.

As a military wife, educator, advocate and caregiver, I understand first-hand the sacrifices families of disabled veterans go through every day. I am so proud to play a small part in making the AVDLM a reality.

The AVDLM honors veterans with both physical 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, not easily told by a single statue or plaque. Not only does the Memorial cover more than two centuries of heroism and struggle, it also 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.

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 a place to pay tribute to some of our most courageous heroes – our disabled veterans. I encourage my neighbors here in Southern California, veterans from around the country and all those who wish to honor them, to come to the dedication ceremony on Oct. 5. My family and I will be blessed to have many friends with us that day. Together, we will stand tall for disabled veterans, and I know Kenny will be standing with us.

The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial dedication ceremony is free and open to the public, but registration is required. For more information, please visit www.avdlm.org.

Diane Musselmann of Huntington Beach serves on the Disabled Veterans’ Life Memorial Foundation board of directors. She is a member of the Disabled American Veterans Auxiliary.