

Architect of Modern DAV Retires

Throughout DAV's distinguished history, a few gifted leaders stand out as true champions of our mission of service and advocacy on behalf of the nation's injured and ill veterans. Among the greatest and most skilled are Judge Robert Marx, National Adjutants Vivian "Crab" Corbly and Dale Adams, Executive Director and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Jesse Brown and National Adjutant Art Wilson.

Now, after nearly two decades as National Adjutant, Wilson, with the concurrence of National Commander Larry A. Polzin, is passing the torch to National Headquarters Executive Director J. Marc Burgess, whose appointment is effective following Wilson's retirement June 1.

Those who have worked alongside Wilson credit his astute leadership, wisdom and foresight with making DAV the preeminent veterans organization in our nation today and far into the future. "Art's management style is to use foresight based on the best knowledge available," said retired National Headquarters Executive Director Rick Patterson. "His management decisions, large and small, are made from a position of intellectual strength and tempered with an accurate interpretation of the facts at hand."

The first Vietnam veteran to join the National Service Program, Wilson began his 47-year DAV career on the cutting edge of change. A graduate of Lynn Classical High School in Lynn, Mass., he attended Burdette College in Lynn until he enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in September 1962, serving in Vietnam, the Philippine Islands, Thailand and Taiwan.

His storied DAV career began in November 1966 as a National Service Officer trainee in Atlanta, followed by National

Service Office assignments in Buffalo and Philadelphia. Wilson later was appointed to supervisory positions in Syracuse, New Orleans and Boston. He was named supervisor of DAV's National Appeals Office at the VA Board of Veterans' Appeals in Washington, D.C., in 1974. In 1976, he was appointed to management duties at National Service and Legislative Headquarters.

Wilson served 12 years as National Service Director before being appointed by then-National Adjutant Adams as Washington Headquarters Executive Director in 1993. Less than a year later, he was appointed by then-National Commander Richard Marbes as National Adjutant.

"Art's leadership and integrity were the right prescription for DAV at a very critical time in the organization's history," said Marbes. "And since then, DAV has thrived and flourished as never before."

Using his personal vision to rebuild DAV, Wilson immediately began to make vital improvements to DAV service. And for 19 years, the progress and the strength of DAV has increased relentlessly, thanks to the superb management skills of Wilson and his hand-picked staff of directors.

"One of the great changes instituted by Wilson was his demand for fiscal responsibility and accountability," Patterson said. "While government and private industry often boasted of re-engineering its operations, DAV lived it. DAV completely revamped how its business was done by embracing and investing in new technology, permitting work to be accomplished more effectively and efficiently."

Wilson's changes have been wildly successful. From 1993 to 2003 the net worth of DAV increased from \$59 million to \$248.7 million – a 422-percent increase.

"Art moved aggressively to strengthen our vital National Service Program," said retired Washington Headquarters

Executive Director David Gorman. "And he fortified DAV's legislative clout with Congress and the federal government. He continued to build the organization's reputation in Washington for promoting reasonable, responsible legislation to gain needed benefits and services for disabled veterans and their families, while protecting current benefits and services."

Aware that DAV's future belonged to younger men and women, Wilson initially brought in a large number of veterans from the Gulf War and other post-Vietnam conflicts to join DAV's professional staff. Over the next decade, they became the fabric of DAV leadership, adding their energy and advocacy to DAV initiatives.

To offset the attrition of retiring National Service Officers, Wilson and his newly appointed National Service staff created the National Service Officer Academy at the University of Colorado in Denver, from which 289 trainees were graduated and quickly moved to the NSO ranks. Wilson instituted the programs that worked so very well back in the mid 1940s when future NSOs were educated at American University and, in 1967, the training at Catholic University.

Under Wilson's leadership DAV has been able to sustain a cadre of about 270 NSOs for a number of years. They are supported by new computers, printers, and necessary software to make them more effective and efficient in the field. These enhancements in manpower and technology ultimately result in better service to the hundreds of thousands of veterans, their dependents and survivors who receive professional representation from DAV each year.

When wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began, Wilson continued to add our newest generation of veterans to the National Service Corps. Today, the majority of our NSO corps are Gulf War and more recent veterans.

Wilson's leadership also helped pave the way for the creation

of the Columbia Trust, the Homeless Veterans Initiative, Women Veterans Program, a larger and more responsive Transportation Network and Voluntary Program and many other enhancements.

The Columbia Trust is today the primary funding source for local DAV service programs, allowing Chapter and Department purchases of Transportation Network vans that support the Hospital Service Coordinator program and Voluntary Services.

As a component of the National Service Foundation, the Trust provides funding from Departments and Chapters with excess resources to other Departments and Chapters that have significant needs for service programs but few resources. From 1996 to 2013, the Columbia Trust has awarded grants totaling more than \$22 million.

Wilson created the Homeless Veterans Initiative, which gave new meaning to our nation's promise that "we don't leave our wounded behind." Wilson led the development of a system that allows Chapters and Departments to assist homeless veterans by sponsoring stand downs, working jointly with other initiatives and creating a safe environment in which homeless veterans would receive the care, comfort and rehabilitation needed to move from the streets to self-sufficiency.

Wilson also urged Congress to strengthen programs aimed at eliminating unemployment and homelessness among America's ill and injured veterans, which resulted in the VA's Homeless Veterans program. Under the program, the number of homeless veterans fell from 250,000 per night in the late 1990s to fewer than 60,000 by 2012. In addition, DAV's Charitable Service Trust has awarded grants of nearly \$6 million to support homeless veterans programs.

With the aging of World War II and Korean War-era veterans, DAV sought to encourage future leaders to donate time on behalf of veterans. Wilson created the Jesse Brown Memorial Youth Scholarship program, which annually honors and helps

fund the higher education of outstanding young volunteers who participate in the VA Voluntary Service program. Since it was created, DAV has awarded 139 scholarships totaling nearly \$1 million.

He also laid the foundation for the future with the development of DAV's Strategic Plan. At the heart of this vital initiative are DAV's core values of Service, Quality, Integrity and Leadership, which Wilson made DAV's guiding principles. Today, the Strategic Plan is working even better than expected and has become a driving force for greater professional success in serving veterans during the 21st century.

Wilson reinstated DAV's Mobile Service Office fleet, which travels to communities around the nation, providing service to those living in rural areas far from DAV National Service Offices.

He also created a new Transition Service Program to assist service members before they leave active duty. The program assigns DAV-trained professionals to military separation centers to inform those leaving the service about their rights and benefits as veterans. In addition, TSOs make direct contact with hospitalized ill and injured veterans returning from combat. DAV is at bedsides in military hospitals, filing their claims, telling them about their benefits and empowering them to lead high-quality lives and to care for their families after active service.

Perhaps Wilson's most inspiring contribution on behalf of veterans came when he cofounded the Disabled Veterans' LIFE Memorial Foundation. Along with noted philanthropist Lois Pope and Jesse Brown, Wilson formed a partnership to nationally honor disabled veterans with a long overdue memorial in Washington, D.C. Wilson continues to serve as the President of the foundation.

As a result of their work, Congress approved construction of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial. Tentatively scheduled for dedication in 2014, the memorial will be the first to honor all disabled veterans, both living and deceased, as a testament to their service.

During Wilson's tenure as National Adjutant, he served on the USO World Board of Governors for several years and the Board of Directors for the USS Intrepid Museum Foundation. He continues to serve as a member of the Intrepid Advisory Council.

Retired General Counsel, Assistant National Adjutant and Executive Director Fred Bristol has personally known most of the organization's leaders, including founder Judge Robert Marx and longtime National Adjutant Vivian "Crab" Corbly. "Without question, the leadership and expertise brought to our organization by National Adjutant Wilson is second to none," Bristol said. "I believe that far into the 21st century, Art's legacy of inspired leadership will be the standard that others will only hope to reach."

"I think he can be classified as one of the finest Chief Executive Officers of an organization that would rival that of any private, public or nonprofit corporation in the United States," he said.

"DAV faced many challenges and hardships during the 20th century, but it is a much stronger, greater organization that faces what lies ahead, thanks to Art Wilson," Gorman said.

Wilson's wife, Mary, who stood with him during his 47-year career, said he probably "achieved most everything that he started out to do. I'm very proud of him for everything that he's accomplished all these years. He's just a good person, just a good family man to both his DAV and Wilson families."

"He will miss it, but he's going to stay involved," she said. "I suspect that he'll go back to finally doing what he loves

the most – assisting ill and injured veterans and their families, one by one.”