Finally, a Home of Our Own

President Obama, national leaders join more than 3,000 attendees for dedication of American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial

From left, DVLMF Co-Founder and President Arthur H. Wilson, President Barack Obama, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewel, DVLMF Co-Founder and Chairperson Lois Pope, and National Park Service Director Jonathan B. Jarvis dedicate the new memorial.

More than 3,000 people—many disabled veterans, their families and survivors—covered the grounds of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial—2.4 acres of serene, bold reminders of the sacrifices still being made daily and the only memorial to honor the living disabled veterans of America’s wars.

Under clear blue skies on Oct. 5, President Barack Obama and a group of dignitaries joined Arthur H. Wilson and Lois Pope, the president and chairman, respectively, of the Disabled
Veterans Life Memorial Foundation (DVLMF), to dedicate the memorial, which sits just 1,000 feet from Congressional offices in Washington, D.C.

Looking out over the star-shaped fountain, taking in the final few seconds of a 16-year journey, Wilson and Pope stood side by side, smiling, knowing all the work it took to get there was worthwhile.

“At long last, the nation now has a new landmark to pay tribute to some of its most courageous heroes,” said Wilson, who retired two years ago as DAV National Adjutant. “The memorial celebrates men and women from all conflicts and each branch of the military who may be broken in body or in mind—but never in spirit.”

The memorial pays tribute to the nation’s 4 million living disabled veterans, as well as their caretakers and the millions of deceased disabled veterans. In granite slabs, glass panels and a single flame atop a solemn reflecting pool, the memorial tells the story of veterans from every conflict and from every branch of service who have borne the brunt of battle and lived to carry the visible—and invisible—wounds of war.

“The experiences etched on these walls remind us that, for those who serve and their families, wars often continue long after the final bullet is fired,” Wilson said. “The most difficult fight often begins after an injury is sustained.”

Joan Shuey, wife of
Joining Wilson and Pope as the ceremony began were the foundation’s board of directors and a litany of government dignitaries led by President Obama, including Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert McDonald, Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and actor and musician Gary Sinise, national spokesman for the memorial.

Unlike the six war tributes on the National Mall, this memorial sits in the shadow of the Capitol, a purposeful reminder that costs of military conflict linger far beyond the battlefield.

“With this memorial, we commemorate, for the first time, the two battles our disabled veterans have fought—the battle over there and the battle here at home, your battle to recover, which at times can be even harder, and certainly as long,” the president said. “You walk these quiet grounds—pause by the pictures of these men and women, you look into their eyes, read their words—and we’re somehow able to join them on a journey that speaks to the endurance of the American spirit. And to you, our wounded, we thank you for sharing your journey with us.”

The 90-minute ceremony included music by the United States Army Band “Pershing’s Own” and a video about the making of the memorial. Ray LaHood, former Secretary of Transportation, served as master of ceremony.

Past DAV National Commander Roberto Barrera, a director of the DVLMF, which raised the private funds as it guided the memorial from conception to completion, led the crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance to begin.

Sinise addressed the crowd, “Today, and from this day forward, with the opening of this national monument, we honor millions
of our heroes living with the wounds of war with a place of healing, remembrance and gratitude for all they have given. And by so doing, we help to ensure that our nation will endure for generations to come. For if we do not remember our defenders, our heroes, how can we expect future generations to step up to serve? Certainly what happened post-Vietnam, when we forgot our returning veterans, we weakened our nation, and we must never, ever, let that happen again.”

Another past DAV National Commander, Dennis Joyner, DVLMF Secretary, provided personal perspective that moved the crowd.

While on patrol in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta in 1969, Joyner, then a member of the Army’s 9th Infantry Division, didn’t hear the explosion that took his legs and an arm. But he knew his life had been changed. “Let me die,” he demanded. But his sergeant reminded him of his family and all he had to live for. Joyner was able to thank his sergeant, Ed Reynolds, as he looked out on the only memorial to honor the living disabled veterans of America’s wars.

Joyner detailed the terrible challenges his mother, wife, daughters and he faced, evoking visible emotion among the crowd.

“My family and I are just an example of the millions of lives affected by lifelong disabilities that are the terrifying consequences of war. Although I’ve been blessed with many achievements in life, the achievement I am most proud of is this memorial. A memorial that gives me, and the many of other disabled veterans like me, a sense of contentment knowing that what we gave, what our families gave and what we continue to give will be forever remembered here in our nation’s capital.”

“This remarkable accomplishment would not have been possible without the overwhelming support we received from veterans organizations, foundations, corporations and more than 1 million individuals,” Wilson said. “Until this day, we have
not remembered those who lived and whose lives were forever changed by the sacrifices they made in uniform.”

Following a musical interlude, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial was officially presented to the American people.

Concluding remarks were delivered by President Obama, followed by performances by vocalist Vicki Golding, singing “God Bless America,” and the “Pershing’s Own,” playing “Order of the Purple Heart March.”

Wilson explained, “As the words of my dear friend, the late Jesse Brown, remind, ‘For every tragic story of a life unraveled by military battle, there are a dozen tales of individuals who have managed to triumph over the harrowing experiences of war and ruin.’”

Adjacent to the U.S. Botanic Garden and south of the U.S. Capitol, the memorial will now be operated by the U.S. Park Service. Designed by landscape architect Michael Vergason, the memorial conveys a combination of strength and vulnerability, loss and renewal. Its focal point is the star-shaped fountain with a single ceremonial flame, flowing into a triangular-shaped reflecting pool. A grove of trees beside the pool signifies hope. Three walls of laminated glass panels with embedded text and photographs and four bronze sculptures by noted sculptor Larry Kirkland, display the universal story of disabled veterans’ pride of service, trauma of injury, challenge of healing and renewal of purpose. Washington-based architectural firm Shalom Baranes Associates was the project architect.

The memorial was completed 14 years after President Bill Clinton signed the federal legislation approved by Congress into law in October 2000.

“Since we began this journey, more than 200,000 courageous men and women have returned from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan
with life-long disabilities,” said Pope, the foundation’s co-founder, who was instrumental in launching the memorial campaign with Wilson and the late Jesse Brown, former U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs and former DAV Executive Director. “Now, it is our turn to honor them with this memorial, as we reaffirm our own commitment to the values and liberties of our great nation.”

Major contributors to the Memorial included DAV; Lois Pope and The Lois Pope Life Foundation; H. Ross Perot Sr. and the Perot Foundation; Leaders In Furthering Education Inc.; Leo Albert and The Leo & Anne Albert Charitable Trust; AT&T Foundation; Kirkland & Ellis, LLP (pro bono); Fifth Third Foundation; Ford Motor Company Fund; State of Maryland; Downey McGrath Group (pro bono); Gary Sinise Charitable Foundation; Norman & Irma Braman; Peter C. Peterson; TriWest Healthcare Alliance and more than 1 million private donors.