

LIFE notes

A Promise Fulfilled: The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial Ten Years Later

September 2024



Dear Friends,

If you're like me, you know that sometimes something as simple as a televised rerun can bring back a flood of memories and remind you of life's journey – in an instant. The other day, while “channel surfing,” I paused on HBO Max and was pulled into Steven Spielberg's acclaimed version of *West Side Story*. It was as if I was transported back in time a half-century ago to a moment that changed my life and started me on the most important mission of my life.

Many of you may know the story, but for those who don't, it begins when I was asked to perform that musical's classic song “Somewhere” at a holiday benefit for patients at the Rusk Rehabilitation Center in New York. When I came to the lyric “Hold my hand, and I'll take you there,” I reached down to take the hand of a young man lying on a hospital gurney in front of the stage. As I reached for him, a chill went through me, and I realized at that moment that my loving gesture had gone wrong: he had no hand I could hold. Somehow, and to this day, I'll never know how I managed to finish the song.

Following the performance, that young soldier shared his story. His entire arm had been blown off in combat in Vietnam. He wasn't alone and didn't think he was special: every one of his brothers in arms in the audience that day had left behind parts of their young bodies fighting in the war, and they were helping each other heal and move forward. I promised them that if I ever had the financial resources, I would dedicate myself to helping them with that lifetime-long process of recovery, rehabilitation, and, most of all, resilience.



The American Veterans Disabled For Life Memorial is the nation's first and only permanent public tribute to the 4.3 million living disabled American Veterans and all those who have died.

The truth is, I never dreamed that one day I would actually be able to do something in their honor, but I hoped against hope that deep in my heart, I could help keep that sacred promise.

Life has some interesting twists and turns, and over the years, I was lucky to have the resources to honor that pledge...so it was that night and my performance of that song that inspired me to create the only permanent public tribute in America for people living with disabilities from war.

Today, we're nearing the 10th anniversary of the dedication of the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial, and I've been reflecting on how the memorial came to be. In the early 1990s, I took a trip to Washington, DC, to see the monuments on the National Mall. Like millions of other Americans, I went to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial so I could trace the name of my cousin in the mirror reflection of that black granite. Next to me was a man in a wheelchair -- crying as he touched the name of his loved one. I experienced an instant flashback to that day at the Rusk Center.

I walked over to a National Park Ranger patrolling the Mall. I said that I had visited the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, Vietnam Memorial, and others but couldn't find the one that honored disabled veterans. When he told me there wasn't one, I boldly proclaimed, "Then I will build one!"

I'm pretty sure the Ranger thought he was dealing with a crazed woman, and I knew how naïve I was about the process, but I was equally determined to make this happen.



Every day for the next six months, I called the office of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, then led by Jesse Brown, himself a disabled veteran. His assistant would take a message; we became fast phone friends. Finally, one morning, the assistant said, "Hold for Secretary Brown."

Although I was intimidated, I just came right out and told him that America needed a memorial for disabled veterans and that he could count on me to get it built. He immediately agreed.

We set a date to meet in Washington, and he also introduced me to Art Wilson, then National Adjutant of the Disabled American Veterans organization, who was also a disabled veteran. Together, we got to work, forming the Disabled Veterans for Life Memorial Foundation, and I became chairperson. The foundation was charged with raising more than \$80 million to build and establish an endowment for the memorial, as by law at the time, no federal funds could be used for this purpose. I made the initial gift of \$10 million to launch the effort.



On October 5, 2014, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial was dedicated in a ceremony presided over by President Barack Obama.

Nothing happens quickly, especially in Washington. We worked our way through miles of bureaucratic red tape; I made numerous site visits and reviewed dozens of designs. Each completed decision spawned even more choices that had to be made.

Over a decade passed, and some of my friends, not to mention my own brother, questioned why I didn't just give up. They said there were other worthy people and organizations I could give my time, energy, and support to. But...I couldn't give up.

Finally, that promise I made years ago to the patients at Rusk was fulfilled. On October 5, 2014, the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial was dedicated in a ceremony presided over by President Barack Obama in front of an audience of more than 5,000 disabled veterans. I was so thrilled that some of you were in the audience on that radiant, sunny day.

So, as we celebrate this 10th anniversary, the mission of the memorial is the same as it has always been: to give disabled veterans the respect they earned and deserve, to educate all Americans now and in the future about these heroes, and to make sure they are never marginalized or forgotten. And since it is the closest memorial in terms of physical location to the Capitol, it stands as a stark reminder to our legislators of the terrible human cost of war. Abraham Lincoln spoke of the sacred responsibility to care for those who have borne the battle, as inscribed at the Veterans Administration door.

I couldn't be prouder of a long-ago promise kept; perhaps it will be my legacy accomplishment and one that I hope you will pay forward always—so that for every disabled veteran, there will be generations more reaching out to hold them, not just “somewhere,” but everywhere. I share this memory with all of you at LIFE, who have supported me throughout the years. For that, I can simply say:

Love Always,

Lois



The American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial was dedicated in front of an audience of more than 5,000 disabled veterans.

Watch Him Soar: American Bald Eagle

Found Injured West of Wellington Returns to the Wild

A Wellington veterinarian found the bird along State Road 80 in April with its pelvis broken and one wing swollen. Weeks of rehab helped it to heal.

In April, veterinarian Dr. Carol Holland found an injured bald eagle along State Road 80 near Loxahatchee. The eagle, unable to fly due to a likely vehicle strike, was rescued with help from Tammy Rubio, founder of Misfit Island Bird Rescue. They carefully wrapped the nearly 8-pound bird in blankets and transported it to the South Florida Wildlife Center. The eagle received extensive treatment there, including care for a fractured pelvis and



Image by Carol Holland via <https://www.palmbeachpost.com>.

Wellington veterinarian Carol Holland (left) and her friend Tammy Rubio, who runs Misfit Island animal rescue agency in Loxahatchee, rescued a bald eagle on the side of State Road 80 in April.



Image provided by South Florida Wild Life Center via <https://www.palmbeachpost.com>.

The eagle is released to the wild near where it was found.

After 111 days of recovery and flight conditioning, the eagle was released to the wild near its rescue site. Although Holland and Rubio couldn't attend, they were relieved the bird returned safely to its natural habitat. The story highlights the challenges of rescuing bald eagles and underscores ongoing conservation efforts, as these majestic birds, once near extinction, remain protected under federal law.

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