Joseph I. Cassilly Snags Disabled American Veteran's Top Honor

In the United States, national holidays are one of the most recognized ways in which we honor our veterans. Although they tend to focus on the liberties that were procured and protected by the veterans of the past, national holidays also remind us, that there are individuals living amongst us today who continue the fight. Our living veterans ensure the safety and liberties of our country in many ways outside of the service and we should honor them for that.

Surviving veterans have very unique needs. There are many aspects that the public does not consider when thinking of supporting veterans who have witnessed combat or have had traumatic encounters while in the service. The average American may not understand the issues and changes that a veteran undergoes. Some of the changes are visible and others are not so easy to see, but to so many families of returning veterans, the scars inflicted during a life of service cannot be ignored.

Through the support of organizations that cater to our surviving veterans, such as the Disabled American Veterans organization, we can honor our living heroes on a more personal level.

The Disabled American Veterans organization was established in 1920 by Cincinnati Superior Court Judge Robert S. Marx, an injured veteran. The organization was established to bring awareness to the disabled veteran population of the United States, which had been largely ignored prior to its creation. The mission of the DAV is to provide resources that help to improve the lives of these veterans. Today, the organization’s support extends to the families of disabled veterans and includes legal and psychiatric help. It also helps disabled veterans secure financial and healthcare benefits.

Yearly, the DAV honors one veteran who exemplifies the motivation of the DAV. They honor an individual who, despite their disability, has lived an exemplary life. The recipient of the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Award is a leader and role model amongst disabled veterans and is very much a solider and hero to the American public.

At the DAV’s 90th Annual National Convention, in New Orleans this August 6th, the DAV choose to highlight the achievements of Joseph I. Cassilly, an Army veteran of the Vietnam War.

At the age of 19, Cassilly was a motivated and focused young man who trained to be an elite Army Ranger. While on a mission in enemy territory, Cassilly fell 50 feet from an Army helicopter breaking his neck and becoming a quadriplegic. This tragic accident was a defining moment in the life of Cassilly, who hoped to pursue a career in law enforcement once out of the Army, but not in a negative way.

Instead of dwelling on his injury and limitations, Cassilly decided to continue his education and become a prosecutor. This line of work may seem like a tall order for a quadriplegic--he may have even been told that once or twice, but the fact that he was to be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life did not sway his decision or career path. He graduated with a BA from the University of Arizona and then continued onto the University of Baltimore to complete his law degree.

As a law student, Cassilly developed a personal passion for upholding the promises buried in the Americans with Disabilities Act. Finding that government buildings were not easily accessible to the handicap, he began battling the government and development firms, through a series of law suits, which forced them to uphold the law. He continued to be a champion for the disabilities act as a young and well respected lawyer. Cassilly ultimately won State's Attorney in Hartford County, Maryland in 1982 where is currently seated.

Awarding Cassilly with the highest honor offered by the DAV seems to have been inevitable. Similar to the purpose of the DAV, Cassilly has made his life's purpose one that is admirable in every way. He has risen from a debilitating accident to forge out a life in which he helps other people. He has chosen to bring attention those who are easily forgotten and ignored from the seat of his wheelchair.

Similar to the DAV he is making changes in the communal fabric that changes the way the American public views disabled individuals and the hurdles that they face. He is offering himself as an example to other disabled veterans who seek help through the DAV in hopes of living a normal life. Making sure that the right support system in place for the next disabled individual, Cassilly offers a path and opportunity to a group that deserves both.

It is clear why Cassilly has been selected to receive the top honor bestowed by the DAV, if the DAV was a person, Cassilly would be his name. He epitomizes the vision and mission of the Disabled Americans Veterans Organization.