

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is my pleasure to appear before you to discuss a matter that is personally very important to me as a citizen of this great country of ours. I am sure that you must routinely rely on the views of experts in many things you consider. However, I trust that, in a "government by the people," the perspective of an ordinary citizen is sometimes just as valuable to you. Although my only credentials are that of an interested citizen, I believe the issue before you today is one in which the views of any patriotic American would be helpful. Accordingly, I feel honored to be here in that capacity to tell you why I am committed to the construction of a memorial in Washington to honor America's disabled veterans.

My conviction to bring about the placement of this memorial comes from my own personal experiences. Therefore, I believe I can best relate them to you by starting at the beginning.

Thirty some odd years ago when I was performing on Broadway, Dr. Rusk, a friend of mine in New York, asked me to visit his rehabilitation center and do a benefit there. I had another friend who used to go to Dr. Rusk's center because she was a polio victim. With the expectation of meeting other people there with polio and with everyday injuries, I decided to do the benefit. Some others and I put together a show that we performed on the rooftop of Dr. Rusk's center.

When I walked onto that rooftop, what I saw so moved me it added a new definition to my life. Before me was a group of disabled veterans. Some were dismembered; some were burned; some were simply lying on litters. I still recall that scene and my reaction so vividly today because, among the medley of songs I had prepared from the then popular "West Side Story" was the song "Somewhere." I thought, "Oh my God, how am I ever going to get through that song without crying." You may recall that some of the lyrics were, "There's a place for us somewhere, there's a place for us, hold my hand and I'll take you there. . . ."

Strangely enough, I was practically-except for my fellow performers-the only unhappy person there. Even though they were in terrible shape, the disabled veterans on that rooftop had smiles on their faces. I did get through the medley of songs, but I walked out of there shaking, and I thought right then-I was a struggling artist at the time-if ever I have a chance, I'm going to do something for these people. It was the defining moment. Most Americans, I believe, would be similarly moved by seeing veterans who suffered so much for the rest of us but who had such spirit, nonetheless.

As it turned out, my life did eventually lead back to disabled veterans and my desire to do something for them, especially. Along the way, some thirty-odd years later, I made a significant gift to the University of Miami for a research center devoted to victims affected by catastrophic neurological disorders, such as those that lead to paraplegia and quadriplegia, and those resulting from stroke, which is the third leading cause of death in this country. I saw the ravaging effects of such diseases firsthand. For example, with my mother, there was a stroke; with my son-in-law, a brain tumor; and with close friends, Alzheimer's and Parkinson's. These are things we all know about and experience with our aging population. That's why the Lois Pope

LIFE Center, is totally dedicated to this research.

A friend of mine, whom I've been acquainted with through the years, Zachary Fisher, asked me to go the veterans hospital in Miami, across the street from the University of Miami medical campus, and look at the Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher House there. I must have misunderstood him. After I drove around the complex a few times and couldn't find the Fisher House, I walked into the VA Hospital and was told the correct location of the Fisher House. They invited me to tour the VA Hospital while I was there, however.

I accepted because Gloria Estefan's father had been there. I knew her because of her generosity to the University of Miami and the Miami Project, which the Lois Pope LIFE Center will house. Her father was a veteran, whom she visited there and took care of every day for fourteen years.

During my visit, I was taken out to a sun deck, where I saw the very same scene I had seen years before at the Rusk rehabilitation center in New York. And I thought: "All right now, I am in a position to do something about this. I must. God is trying to tell me something; He is; something has to be done." So, I made telephone calls and sent information by facsimile for about six months before I finally got in contact with the Honorable Jesse Brown, then Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and before I met Arthur Wilson of the Disabled American Veterans.

A short time before I made contact with Secretary Brown and Mr. Wilson, I had visited Washington to go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and touch my cousin's name. That moving experience prompted me to question where on the Mall was the memorial honoring disabled veterans. I was, of course, told that there was no such memorial. I was a little dismayed. So, my first question to Mr. Wilson when I met him was: "Why isn't there a memorial honoring disabled veterans on the mall? These are the men and women who took bullets for us!" America would not be the land of the free and the home of the brave, in my opinion, if we did not remember these veterans who have sacrificed so much. Many of them were not just disabled: many also die prematurely due to their disabilities.

Quite simply, these experiences are what gave me my appreciation for the sacrifices of disabled veterans and my awareness of the debt society owes these courageous men and women. Long after the guns have been silenced, their disabilities persist. It therefore is only fair that we not forget them as the echoes of battle grow distant and faint. Every American will not have the opportunity to see the suffering and courage of our disabled veterans firsthand as I have. If they had that experience, I have no doubt they would agree without hesitation that we should properly acknowledge and honor these special veterans. Mere words or our memorial can never fully repay these veterans for what they have given up to protect and defend our way of life, but we can at least let them know that we are a Nation that does not take their sacrifices for granted. We can at least also let our citizens express their gratitude through this memorial. All Americans should be able to go there and say: "Yes we remember you. Thank you." In turn, these brave veterans will be able to go to their memorial and say, "My country didn't forget me."

Thank you for allowing me to share with you my experience and my vision for a memorial to honor some of America's most deserving heroes.

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