



State's Attorney Named DAV's



DAV PHOTOS: D. CLARE

Joseph I. Cassilly, a paralyzed Army veteran of the Vietnam War, has been named the 2011 DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year. The award, which is the pinnacle award given to DAV members, will be presented at the DAV's 90th National Convention in New Orleans on Aug. 6.

"Joe Cassilly is truly deserving of the top honor bestowed by the DAV," said National Commander Wallace E. Tyson. "At every turn, life offered him some pretty stiff challenges and he was never found wanting."

Cassilly, a member of Chapter 30, Bel Air, Md., stared down his first major challenge when he enlisted in the Army in 1968. In Vietnam, he trained to become an Army Ranger.

Retired Army Maj. Chuck Thomas was an operations officer for F. Co., 75th Rangers, 25th Infantry Division when Cassilly interviewed to join the elite unit. "Joe fit right in. He had no problems," Thomas recalled.

During a helicopter extraction in enemy territory in III Corps, Cassilly was attempting to climb into a

Huey on a rope ladder while carrying an M60 machine gun and 1,000 rounds of ammunition. The down-draft of the helicopter's rotors pulled the ladder out from underneath him, and he plummeted more than 40 feet. He landed on the machine gun, breaking his neck and rendering him a quadriplegic.

But he would not allow his injury to define him.

Thomas was one of the first of Cassilly's fellow soldiers to see him after his injury. "I was amazed that a 19-year-old kid, with that kind of injury, already knew he was going to move forward in life. He was going to go to college; already going to go to law school. He had a life planned out and he wasn't going to let anything get in the way."

When his early goal of a career in law enforcement was no longer an option, he decided instead to become a prosecuting attorney.

He started his academic career by earning an undergraduate degree at the University of Arizona in Tucson in 1974. In 1977, he went on to earn his juris doctorate

Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year

at the University of Baltimore.

While still in law school, he sued his county and local municipal governments time and again for failing to make government-owned facilities accessible to the disabled.

“When I returned from Vietnam, the world wasn’t nearly as accessible as it is today and considerations for disabled people weren’t being taken into account in new construction projects. I wasn’t trying to make a name for myself. I was just trying to get the government to uphold the law,” he said, referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Despite being told he could not be a trial lawyer because of being bound to a wheelchair, Cassilly prevailed.

“The first day I was in court, not everyone knew I was in a wheelchair,” Cassilly recalled. “So when the judge came to the bench, they said, ‘All rise,’ and the judge came out and sort of gave me a look and motioned for me to stand up. I pushed back and he saw I was in a chair and then he realized.”

While serving as an Assistant State’s Attorney in 1982, Cassilly made the decision to enter politics and ran for State’s Attorney of Harford County, Md. He won the job and has held onto it ever since.

Along the way, Cassilly has found time to remain a visible figure in the veterans community of greater Baltimore.

“Joe is truly an inspiration to the local veterans community,” said Ron Minter, supervisor of the National Service Office in Baltimore and fellow member of DAV Chapter 30. “Whether he is tangling with elected officials in Washington or helping design more accessible stadiums for sports fans in Baltimore, Joe has made this area better for disabled veterans

and safer for us all.”

He’s been involved on accessibility committees to make stadiums, subways and public areas more accessible for disabled people.

As a state’s attorney, he takes military service into consideration when handling cases involving veterans.

Compassionate but tough, he’s known foremost as a fierce advocate of the law. Despite his leadership role, he still tries cases and prides himself on finding justice for victims. He’s handled capital murder cases and developed the state’s first family justice center.

He has been recognized nationally for excellence as a state’s attorney and he is known nationally for impacting legislation on crime. His greatest professional honor came in 2008 when he was named president of the National District Attorneys Association, the oldest and largest organization representing prosecutors. He was also named the Outstanding Marylander with a Disability in 2002.

He is also an author. His book titled *Decoration for Valor* follows the lives of three people during the early 1970s. One of the characters is a 20-year-old soldier who returned from Vietnam disabled. The book is undeniably based on personal experiences.

The honor of being named the DAV’s Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year isn’t lost on community leaders who have followed their hometown hero’s many accomplishments.

“We have known for decades what a treasure Joe is. Coming from a law enforcement background, I knew I could always count on Joe to be a great prosecutor and a great friend,” said Joe Ryan, a childhood friend, who serves as manager of the Harford County Office of Drug Control Policy. “We’re glad to see one of our own receive this prestigious national award.”



Maryland State's Attorney Joseph Cassilly.