

Selflessness Spells Success

Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year

Some people challenge their disabilities, testing their bodies against ski slopes and sheer cliffs. Some surrender to their disabilities, accepting certain limitations and rarely attempt to exceed them. Others strive to maintain who they are, refusing to allow their disabilities to define their identity. They naturally rise above their disabilities through holding on to qualities and values they developed as they grew up, such as compassion and caring for others. The latter, perhaps, best fits the mold of DAV's outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, Jim Sursely, 45, of Apopka, Fla.

First impressions are not of the wheelchair and the three missing limbs from a land-mine explosion in Vietnam, but of a warm, welcoming face, an outreached hand eagerly inviting you to his home and his world. Indeed, his home and his family are his world, and he is at the center of it. At any moment, his wife, Jeannie, or any or all of his four children are around him, holding on to him, asking him to shoot some hoops or swim with them, help out with some homework, go to a movie or just talk. Outgoing but soft-spoken and serious, he obliges all requests.

His sense of family, civic responsibility and athletics, among other concerns, he will tell you, was molded back in Rochester, Minn., a sprawling bedroom community in the southwest corner of the state and home of the renowned Mayo Clinic. "I'm almost always with my family. We come as a package deal."

He also learned how to fish, play baseball, basketball and football in Rochester. At 6'2" and 220 lbs., he dreamed of playing professional football. "It probably wasn't a realistic dream because I didn't

have great speed."

Instead, reality for Jim was Vietnam. After driving by an Army recruiting office he took all of three minutes to think about it and signed up. He gave little thought to the escalating war in Vietnam. "When you're 19 years old you're ten feet tall and bulletproof. I knew about Vietnam but I didn't think about it."

After serving in Germany he volunteered for duty in Vietnam. "I was a little disgruntled sitting in Germany as a garrison soldier. I didn't look at Vietnam as



DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year Jim Sursely stresses that the government and society have a debt to repay those who were disabled serving their country.

some sort of John Wayne movie. I looked at it realistically as a place of intrigue for a 19-year-old guy."

He says he found intrigue for ten months with a line outfit operating in Chu Lai, 35 kilometers south of Danang. Then, around 6:30 p.m. on Jan. 11, 1969, he stepped on an anti-tank mine. He recalls being thrown some 25 feet into the air and landing on his back, his clothes on fire from the explosion. Never losing consciousness, he asked, "Is everyone else O.K.? Did anyone else get hurt?"

What did he feel himself?

"I reached my right arm out to feel my legs, but all I felt was numbness. There wasn't an ounce of pain at that point in time. I didn't have a clue. Then, when they put me in the medivac chopper, I felt like I was going to freeze to death, but I never thought about actually dying."

Buddies from his unit came to the 95th Evac Hospital in Danang to see him, some walking right by his bed because they didn't recognize him. Wrote one visitor, company clerk Tom Trepanier, now a Catholic priest in Milwaukee, Wis.: "My vision became blurred as tears swelled in my eyes. They must be wrong. This couldn't...couldn't possibly be the Jim I had known. His eyes were closed in what I hoped was sleep. His face was coated with grease to keep the germs out of the third-degree burns which distorted his boy-like expression. His hairline was badly singed and obviously uneven. There was a desperateness about the way his jugular vein throbbed and fought to push the blood to his head. The six inches of his left arm that remained were neatly bandaged and hung in a sling next to the bed. The white sheet that covered him was gro-



Sursely notes that his sense of family is tied to his own childhood in Rochester, Minn. The Sursely family from L to R: Mary, Jeannie, Jim, Ryan and Jimmy.

tesque as it folded and curved to knee length and then disappeared to join the mattress. Drainage tubes angled out from all sides of the bed, making him look like some type of scientific experiment. I crept closer to the bed, trying to figure out what I could say when he opened his eyes. What could I say? I'm sorry.... I couldn't give him his arm and legs back. All I could offer was the confidence of our friendship. Big deal. Not much in return for what he had given."

After three days in Danang, Sursely was sent to Japan where a series of surgeries, skin grafts and transfusions ensued. One week later, some ten days after he suffered his injuries, he began to realize the extent of them. But it wasn't until he arrived at Fitzsimons Army Medical Center in Colorado and began therapy with a wheelchair that the "full impact" of his wounds struck home. "Then I realized what was gone. Where am I going from here really hit me."

His most difficult experience ever, he says, was seeing his parents for the first time at Fitzsimons. "I had never seen myself since there were no mirrors. I was just Jim. I was excited to see my parents, and I saw them at the nurse's station when they arrived. But they walked right past my bed

to the end of the ward looking for me. Then a nurse brought them back to my bed. They were scared to death."

Sursely went through eight months of demanding occupational and physical therapy at Fitzsimons with what he describes as a "mixed bag of guys" in his hospital ward. "Some were withdrawn and said to themselves, 'Why me?' Why do I have to carry this cross?" I decided early on that if I was going to get along with this I'd have to fix my attitude real fast. Some guys got around. Some laid around in bed. Laying around didn't look real good to me."

The "scariest" part of physical therapy was learning how to swim, says Sursely. "Getting into a pool missing two legs and an arm., learning how to breathe, how to balance myself in the water, was sort of like being born again at 22. But I did regain my confidence.

Every little thing was so meaningful, like the simple things we take for granted, such as getting in and out of a car, learning how to get back into a chair."

Through his athletic endeavors and coaches back in Rochester, he says, he

developed qualities in himself that carried him through his wounds in Vietnam and the long hospitalization and rehabilitation that followed, as well as other challenges in life. "Some of my best memories are of the bus rides to away football games. Most of the trips back were rowdy and loud. Even if we lost, we were sad for only about 10 minutes. The coaches wouldn't let us get down. And

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the inspiration not to quit came from my coaches when I was growing up."

Sursely says when he returned to Rochester he received "overwhelming support" from the community, which helped him

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Sure, there's pain associated with thoughts of where you were before, having two legs and two arms. But I'll take what I have today, an opportunity to work, my family, wife and kids. How much better could it be?

Disabled Vet

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with his readjustment to an able-bodied, civilian world. Today, he attributes his success to the encouragement he has received from family and friends. "My parents are positive people, and it seems everybody in my life has been that way. Maybe we were a team at Fitzsimons, and we had to go through that together. But 90 percent of the credit goes to those who have touched my life. I've never faced any rejection. I can only take 10 percent of the credit."

But his own relentless determination has driven him as well. After obtaining his real estate license in 1978, he began purchasing properties and a rental business. His latest venture is a roofing company. "I get more enjoyment out of working than any recreational pastime I've been involved in. There's the people side of it. And at the end of the day when you're

worn out, I feel kinda good. My wife says I don't know how to relax. I can't sit in a chaise lounge. I'd rather be in my van chasing down a real estate deal."

He's also pursued public office. Concerned about Social Security and tax issues and how they were affecting residents in Florida, he ran as a Democratic candidate for the fifth congressional district in 1976. Today he's concerned about a lack of recreational opportunities for kids in Apopka, noting a shortage of parks and a pool. Would he take another shot at political office? "I'd like to participate, but I probably don't have a clue about what goes on in Washington. I'm sure I'd anger a lot of people because I'd tell them how I feel. I can't play the game just to get along."

Sursely's serious about disabilities as well. He stresses that public facilities and restaurants should be accessible, and that the government and society have a debt to repay those who were disabled serving their country. But he adds that he, as someone who is disabled, has a responsibility to help the non-disabled bridge any gaps between the two worlds. He recalls an experience at a dog track, when an able-bodied couple bumped into someone's wheelchair. "He jumped all over them. But he wasn't angry because they tripped over his chair. He's angry because he's in that chair. That's what that was about."

The answer, he says, is for disabled individuals to use anger in the right way and open their world to the able-bodied, as he has through speaking about his disabilities and experiences before school groups. "Most people shy away from disabilities and wheelchairs. I realize that if I don't initiate a conversation, most people won't."

What has motivated him to pursue life so fully, despite the loss of three limbs?

"I've always been positive and upbeat. All my life, the word 'no' to me has meant 'I don't understand. Please explain to me why I can't do this.' I've never shied away from anything because I thought it might not work. Sure, there's pain associated with thoughts of where you were before, having two legs and two arms. But I'll take what I have today, an opportunity to work, my family, wife and kids. How much better could it be? You could always wonder why, but it would be a waste of time."

Athletics, such as swimming, basketball and baseball, helped Sursely through his long rehabilitation after losing both legs and his left arm above the elbow in Vietnam. Today, he strongly encourages his children to participate in athletics and recreational activities.

