

Pennsylvania Woman Earns DAV's Outstanding Disabled Veteran Award

Karoline Martin, DAV 1997 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, with her seeing eye dog, Desere, and her horse, Willow. Both animals are affectionate companions and necessary tools in her life. A former Army sergeant, Ms. Martin's blindness is attributed to her exposure to hazardous chemicals while serving as a petroleum specialist in the Army.

Since becoming blind, former Army sergeant Karoline V. Martin's accomplishments have been nothing short of extraordinary. They include downhill skiing, teaching horseback riding to others with severe disabilities, and this year, being selected the 1997 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year by the DAV.

She is the first female disabled veteran to receive the DAV's most prestigious individual award.

A life member of DAV Chapter 90, West Chester, Pa., Ms. Martin is the adopted daughter and only child of a retired Army Noncommissioned Officer (NCO) Robert Mertz and his wife, Okja. It was her adopted father's example that led her to the military.

"My adopted father was a career NCO and I was familiar with the military," Ms. Martin said. "While he and my adopted mother were stationed in Germany, I was in Pittsburgh going to college trying to make ends meet. It wasn't easy. After a while, I realized I needed more discipline in my life. My experience with my father and the military had taught me that discipline was one thing I could develop plenty of in the military. So, I enlisted in 1983."

The 19-year-old recruit soon became an accomplished soldier, completing the rigorous Airborne training at Ft. Benning, Ga., to become a member of the famed 82nd Airborne Division. Ms. Martin later served with the Army's elite 5th Special Forces Group at Ft. Bragg, N.C., and a tour of duty in Frankfurt, Germany. Her superior leadership earned her rapid promotions to the rank of sergeant in just seven years.

But Ms. Martin's dreams of a promising military career were eventually cut short by a progressive loss of vision. As a petroleum specialist in the Army, she was constantly exposed to hazardous chemicals, thought to have resulted in her service-connected disability. She was honorably discharged from the military in 1990 and started along the road to rehabilitation, where she was soon learning new skills and adjusting to her disability.

A short time later, Ms. Martin contacted the DAV National Service Office in Winston-Salem, N.C., for assistance and to represent her claim for service-connected disability compensation. After evaluation of her impairment at the VA medical center at Raleigh-Durham, N.C., and confirmation of the evaluation at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., she was awarded 100% service-connected disability compensation from the VA.

"The most difficult thing I had to overcome was learning to have the patience to wait for others to do things for me," Ms. Martin recalled. "The lack of independence resulting from my blindness was really tough. I missed the spontaneity of getting up and going and doing what I like, when I like. Waiting for a ride, rather than getting in my car and driving, was hard to get used to."

But, in 1992, Ms. Martin discovered a unique, life-changing experience.

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Karoline Martin, DAV 1997 Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, congratulates riding student Linda Snyder-Kohle following a riding competition. Ms. Martin is an instructor in therapeutic riding at the Thorncroft Equestrian Center in Malvern, Pa., where she shares her love of riding with people with disabilities.





Karoline Martin receives the Department of Pennsylvania's Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year award from then-Department Commander Dwayne R. Deist.

Disabled Veteran

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rience that gave her back her freedom and independence—the National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, and it truly changed her life.

“I sent for a registration packet and signed up for the 1992 clinic in Snowmass, Colo.,” she said. “I paid my way there, had great fun, and got a super education. I learned how veterans with various disabilities adapted to skiing, and I thought, ‘if they can adapt, I can adapt.’”

“One of the disabled veterans I met at the clinic was Vietnam veteran Tim Davis. He is a bi-lateral, above the knee amputee. He encouraged me early on and became a special friend and mentor. We recently fell in love and plan to marry in the future.

“Tim’s encouragement and the freedom of soaring down those snow-covered slopes inspired me to change my university studies to pursue a career in therapeutic training for people with disabilities.”

Ms. Martin now shares her love of riding with people with disabilities, much the same as the Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic shares the thrill, excitement, and love of winter sports in a therapeutic way with disabled veterans. In 1993, she joined the Thorncroft therapeutic riding program in Malvern, Pa., first as a student, and later as a volunteer assistant during lessons. The next year she entered and successfully completed Thorncroft’s nine-month instructor program, gaining her certification as an instructor in therapeutic

riding in 1995. Today she imparts the strength of character and discipline she has developed to others learning to live with disabilities.

Since her blindness, Ms. Martin’s life has undergone many adjustments. When she talks about her seeing eye dog, a beautiful female German Shepherd named Desere, or her horse, a bay thoroughbred named Willow, there is laughter and affection in her voice.

“Desere is a fantastic dog and an incredible companion,” she said. “From the time I got her from Seeing Eye in Morristown, N.J., we were inseparable friends. She is my eyes. And Willow...

“I had been searching for a year and a

half when Willow came into my life,” she recalls affectionately. “Riding gives me a sense of power and sensitivity all at once. Willow helps make all of that possible. He is an extraordinary horse.”

Extraordinary is part of this 33-year-old woman’s life. In addition to being selected the DAV’s Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year, she received the DAV Freedom Award during the 1997 DAV National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic and was selected as the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year for the DAV Department of Pennsylvania in June. And that’s not all, before the year is over, she will begin re-establishing contacts with her biological family.

“I recently discovered who my biological mother is and learned that I have three brothers and a sister.” Ms. Martin said. “I’m very happy about discovering my biological family, and excited about beginning to meet them this fall.

“It has been an unbelievable year for me, and now to be chosen as the Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the year ... More than anything, I’m honored, and I’m also very humbled at the same time. I recognize that there are so many disabled veterans who have made incredible differences in their lives. To be awarded this honor from among them is – well – just awesome!

Be on the lookout for more “awesome” from Karoline Martin. This year’s DAV Outstanding Disabled Veteran of the Year already has her sights set on competitive horseback riding at the Paralympics in the year 2000. ■



Karoline Martin hitting the slopes at the 1997 National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic, Crested Butte, Colorado.