

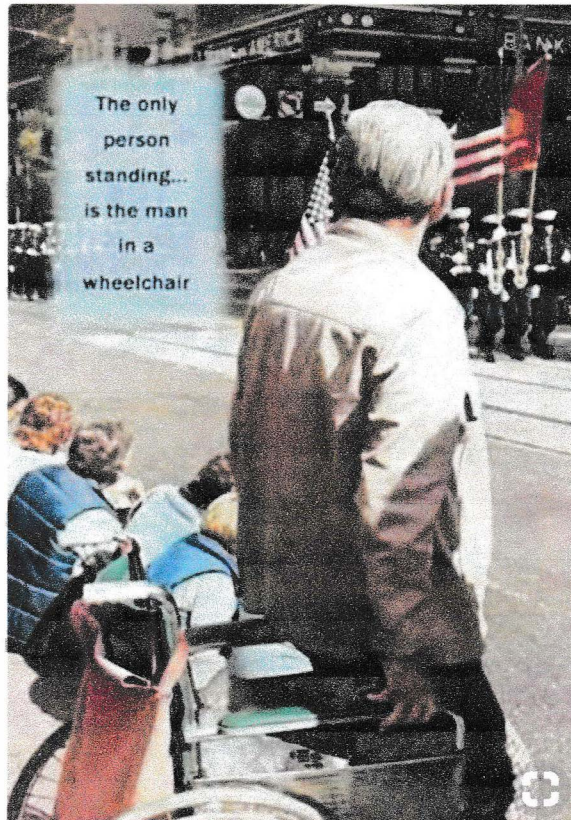
Grand Prize Winner

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DWCA - 6th grade

How We Treat Our Veterans

"Freedom is not Free"



Recently I saw a photo on the internet of a veteran standing from his wheelchair as soldiers march by with an American flag. He is the only person to stand and pay his respects. This touching picture made me think how great a price veterans pay for our freedom. Freedom is not free.

While away fighting for our freedom, veterans miss birthdays, holidays and even the births of their children. Their spouses have to work extra hard without their help. I even see videos of their dogs missing their owners and jumping for joy upon their return. When many veterans return from war, they then have more battles to deal with. Many are mistreated or have no home or family to go back to. They face long lines for health care at Veterans Affairs Centers. It can be difficult to find jobs or affordable homes. Some may even become homeless and looked down upon by strangers.

Some veterans face both physical and mental challenges. They may have been hurt physically and need to endure months or years of rehabilitation. They may have witnessed friends and comrades get killed or injured and be mourning for them. Sometimes, veterans suffer mental illness and become addicted to painkillers or other drugs. This substance abuse affects not only them, but their friends and family. Family who have been waiting for them to return home, may lose their patience, and turn away from their problems. I saw on the internet, the News Tribune of Tacoma, Wash., on May 26, 2011 reported, "With veterans now accounting for one of every five suicides in the nation, the suicide rate is out of control." The article addresses how there are few effective programs for veterans and a lack of awareness of this problem in our country. In 2010, the VA (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs) said that "veterans account for roughly 20% of the estimated 30,000 suicides annually in the U.S." This is a sad statistic of a large problem our country needs to address.

In an article by "Newsmax: Veterans should be treated with honor, respect," one sergeant who was honorably discharged in 1946, suggested that the President appoint a commission to look into providing services to veterans immediately. He also thought they should recruit lawyers through bar associations, to volunteer and act as advocates for any soldier or for veterans needing help finding jobs, getting medication, etc. Lawyers who participated later said this was one of the best things they had done in their lives. This also helps veterans who need medical help right away so they don't become addicted to alcohol or drugs.

Other solutions to help veterans adjust to life when they return is to take yoga to help them deal with stress. Therapy horseback riding or owning a therapy dog might help them. We could arrange reunions so they can meet others in the same situation and so these veterans won't feel so alone. They deserve the best medical care in the country and any extra benefits to show our gratitude. I find it sad when the newspaper or news shows highlight what celebrities are wearing and where they are eating, but a soldier killed in a faraway land is only briefly mentioned.

I visited the Korean War Veterans Memorial two summers ago. It was evening and the lights reflecting off the larger than life statues of our troops representing the land, sea, and air forces who fought in the war, was very impressive. They are in military gear with raincoats and appear to be crossing a hazardous field in battle. The concern on their faces makes you realize how much danger they endured for us. It is something to see at night with their coats and faces lit up and long shadows across the plaza.



We should help our veterans by providing them a home to return to and the care they need to get back on their feet. After all they've done for us, it's the least we can do for them. We need to continually express our gratitude for their bravery and let them know how much we appreciate them. My grandfather fought in the Navy in World War II. He passed away long before I was born, and I like to acknowledge him on Memorial Day each year. I remember reading a plaque near the Pool of Remembrance beside the Korean War Veterans Memorial stating, "Freedom is Not Free." Whenever we see a veteran, we should all say "thank you."