

# Woman continues fight for Vietnam veterans' memorial

By Rick Guinness

Special to the Journal Inquirer

Jean Risley of Coventry still misses her brother who died in Vietnam, and wants to create a War Memorial that is exclusive to Connecticut residents who died during that war.

Several towns have erected local memorials with the names of hometown veterans who died in Vietnam.

And of course people are well acquainted with the presence of the national Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C., which has all the names of all the Vietnam veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice.

There is even a national war memorial that is transportable and goes on tour periodically, for people who can't make the trip to the nation's capital to see the name of their loved one.

It wasn't until local middle school students approached her because she was one of the surviving relatives of a Connecticut Vietnam veteran that she came up with the idea to create a state memorial for Vietnam Veterans.

The students told her there were 612 Connecticut Vietnam veterans who were killed, but that the state does not have one memorial that honors all of them.

So she decided it was time to build one after

Several locations have been proposed.

And she says the town of Coventry gave her a parcel of land in July.

Clark and Riley Memorials of Manchester offered to create the stone tablets at cost — which is about \$28,000. So far she has raised \$6,000 towards the project.

For Risley, the issue is still an emotional one, but her creation of the state memorial is therapeutic, she says.

"I am hoping that within a two year period I will have it done," Risley said.

"My brother, Army Spc. Robert Tillquist was killed in Vietnam on Nov. 4 1965," she said. "He was an Army combat medic, and the recipient of Distinguished Service Cross.

Born July 10, 1942, he was killed at the age of 23.

Risley has spoken to students in the 6th through 8th grades at the Captain Nathan Hale Middle School, who had researched the number of Vietnam War casualties from

Connecticut.

"After working with the students — when the project was over — I said 'we should build a memorial.'

"They were calling anyone in the state who had lost someone in that war," adding that their school project started in 2001.

Jean Risley's work comes at a time when people are as divided on the war in Iraq as they were about the war in Vietnam, only without the same amount of passion or protest.

"I support our men out there," she said. "I don't agree with the war. I don't like losing all those men."

But Risley concedes that there is an inherent contradiction in saying you support American troops when you don't support what they are doing and the need for federal funding and public support in order for them to win.

"They are doing something good for their country," Risley said. "I don't believe antiwar protesting."

Risley has suffered much loss.

Her father died of a heart attack four months after her brother died, she said. And her mother died in 1989.

"I lost my other brother, who died of a heart attack 15 years ago," she added. "I am doing well, though. This makes me energetic.

It is very important. There are 612 men in Connecticut who need to be welcomed home, and that's what I want to do."

There is a memorial in Coventry with only four names on it from the Vietnam War. It wasn't built that long ago.

There is no one memorial that honors all of the 612 Vietnam veterans from Connecticut that stands alone.

Already, she has garnered support from members of the American Legion Riders, Post 14, who rode into Coventry recently to promote her cause. Risley said she is extremely grateful.

The proposed monument would be made of two black granite slabs — with the two panels each 4-feet wide.

To make the memorial project a success, Risley will need the support of the community, and she is accepting donations. Those interested in helping may call Jean Risley at 742-8841 or e-mail her at [rwriley@snet.net](mailto:rwriley@snet.net).