

Local woman realizes goal of Vietnam Memorial

Memorial will list names
of 612 from Connecticut

By BRENDA SULLIVAN
Staff Writer
brensullivan@remindernet.com

COVENTRY — Jean Risley's brother was 23 years old when he was killed in Vietnam.

"That was actually considered 'old.' The average age of a soldier was 19, during the Vietnam War," she said.

Now her brother's name — Robert Tillquist — will be among 612 names that will be inscribed on a new Connecticut Vietnam Veterans War Memorial.

Risley recently received per-

mission from the town council to erect the monument on the town's Veteran's Memorial Green, at the intersection of Lake and Cross Streets.

Risley has decided on a design similar to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

"The jet black granite will come from South Africa. It's the best you can get," she said.

The memorial will be 15 feet long, and will consist of four panels.

"It will be similar to how the memorial in D.C. is. It starts at 5 feet at the apex, and angles downward until it ends up at 3 feet, 3 inches," Risley explained.

It will be built on a gray base,

which will be 15 feet long, by about 14 inches high, by 2 feet wide.

Risley was inspired by the work of local students to build this monument.

In 2002, she was among the families who were interviewed by Nathan Hale Middle School students for what was called the "612 Project."

Students spent about a year talking with veterans and families of fallen soldiers, to compile biographies of the 612 Connecticut servicemen and women who lost their lives during the Vietnam War.

"They also got The Wall That Heals to come to Coventry, and that kind of inspired me, too,"

Risley said.

On Veterans Day 1996, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund unveiled a half-scale replica of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., designed to travel to communities throughout the United States.

According to the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial Fund Web site, "The traveling exhibit, known as The Wall That Heals, allows the many thousands of veterans who have been unable to cope with the prospect of 'facing The Wall' to find the strength and courage to do so within their own communities, thus allowing the healing process to begin."

(See "Monument," page 3.)

Monument will cost \$35,000

Continued from page 1

— Although a number of years had gone by since the middle school students' project, the idea of a monument for Connecticut veterans simmered in the back of Risley's mind.

"One morning, I woke up and said, 'I am going to do a Vietnam Memorial. I actually thought about it a couple of years ago, but then I said to myself, 'Grandmothers don't get up in the morning and just decide to do a memorial.'"

Another part of her argued with her 'common sense,' however. "I said, 'Why can't I do this? I *am* going to do this,' she said.

The memorial designed by Risely will include not only the names of those who were killed in Vietnam, but also those classified as missing in action (MIAs) and prisoners of war (POWs) from Connecticut.

"So, there will be about 306 names on each of the center panels. And on the end panels, one will be laser-etched with [the figure of] three soldiers, and the other with nurses — we didn't lose any from Connecticut, but they served, so I thought we might honor them, also," Risley said.

She added that her vision of a Connecticut memorial has already received a great deal of generous support. A local contractor has offered to do the excavation work, and the foundation for free, Risley said. And the company making the monument, Clark and Riley Memorials in Manchester, has offered to install the monument at no cost.

The price of the monument itself, however, is about \$35,000. "I need to raise about two-thirds of the funds before they will start making it," Risley said.

As for when the monument might be installed, "It probably won't be until 2008, because I have to pay so much down before they will work on it, and it will take about eight months to make it," Risley said.

Local veteran's organizations are in the process of planning fundraisers for the memorial for this spring, including a motorcycle run in May.

Risely has filed for nonprofit status so that donations made towards the monument's construction can be tax deductible.

Those who want to make a donation can send a check in care of the project's treasurer: Connecticut Vietnam Veterans Memorial Inc., c/o Paul Jatkowski, 91 Upton Drive, Coventry, CT 06238.

Anyone interested in organizing a fundraising event for the project can call Risley at 742-8841.