



Q&A: Debbie Burak

Spreading the word about an overlooked veterans benefit

— BY JOAN TUPPONCE —

When Debbie Burak learned about an often overlooked benefit from the Veterans Administration, she was determined to share the information. The Midlothian resident immediately created www.veteranaid.org. She recently sat down to talk about it with **BOOMER**/ife.

Q: WHY DID YOU START WWW.VETERANAID.ORG?

A: When I had to move my mother after my dad passed away, I discovered the Veterans Administration's Aid and Attendance [special pension]. I filed for and got the pension awarded to my mother as the widow of a World War II veteran. I discovered that it had been a benefit for over 57 years sitting idle and unknown. If we had known about it from the beginning, my parents would have had more than \$160,000 to help pay for their care over the course of nine years. I wanted to educate the general public about the pension and be a light for someone else who is now just beginning this journey as a caregiver for a loved one or elderly parents.

Q: ARE YOU OR A FAMILY MEMBER A VETERAN?

A: My dad served in World War II as a sonar seaman. Both my brothers served. One served four years in the Navy and the other made a military career in the Coast Guard, retiring as a captain.

Q: HOW DOES THE WEBSITE HELP VETERANS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

A: It educates and informs people about the VA's Improved Pension and its three levels of benefits: Basic Pension, Housebound and Aid and Attendance. All the forms necessary for making application can be downloaded from the site as well as additional resources and articles. The site addresses reasonable expectations once you have filed. I also share my personal experience and insights to the process. I am very proud that the site has become the No. 1 most respected and trusted online source for information regarding the Aid and Attendance pension benefit. On average, we receive over 10,000 unique visitors every month.

Q: WHEN DID YOU START THE WEBSITE AND HOW HAVE YOU EXPANDED IT?

A: I launched the site November 20, 2005, and dedicated it to the memory of my parents, Frank and Lillie Cicirelli. The site is solely sponsored by WovenEmbrace.com, a sympathy gift and remembrance site that I created. A year and a half ago, we expanded the site to include live forums. We have a virtual library of questions and answers. Last year we expanded our acknowledgements to include the Patriot Guard Riders, a motorcycle club of veterans. A very moving video tribute to their services honoring our veterans is proudly displayed on our home page.

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ABOUT THE WEBSITE?

A: That it makes a difference for someone else, while honoring the service and sacrifice of our veterans. I am humbled that my efforts have helped thousands of people who had run out of hope and options. I always say that this is my mother's gift to give. I am simply the messenger.

Joan Tupponce is a freelance writer living in Richmond.