

National Veterans Wheelchair Games



Athlete Profile (National)

Penny Gillett – The Spirit Carries On

Once a prestigious award is given to an individual, it could be easy for the recipient to forget the stellar performance that earned the special honor. Penny Gillett, however, is not one of those people.

In 1995, at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games in Atlanta, Ga., Gillett was selected, along with Army veteran James Torres of Caguas, Puerto Rico, to receive the annual *Spirit of the Games* award. The coveted award is given each year to the athletes who most exemplify the qualities of a true champion – athletic excellence, sportsmanship and strength of character. Thirteen years later, those qualities continue to define Penny Gillett.

Gillett, 54, has attended 22 of the past Games, which are now in their 28th year, and has watched the event grow. “The main difference between my first year and now is the number of competitors,” she said. “I think the number was in the 400s, with maybe 14 women. Now, there are nearly 600 competitors.”

Throughout the years, Gillett has accumulated a wide array of medals and honors at the Games and other nationally sponsored athletic events. In 1997, she was the first female competitor to win the National Rifle Association’s Beeman event, a shooting competition that promotes precision shooting for persons with disabilities. It is no surprise then, that shooting sports are among her favorite at the National Veterans Wheelchair Games as well. “If I only competed in one event it would be shooting – because I’m good at it,” she says matter of factly.

In her early twenties, Gillett was a Navy Corpsman stationed in the Great Lakes area. She began to develop chronic ailments such as back pain, weak legs and shaky eyes. After only a year and a half, she was discharged from military service with a then-undiagnosed illness. She later learned that it was multiple sclerosis (MS).

Rather than giving up once she knew the seriousness of her diagnosis, Gillett continued her education and earned her master’s degree in clinical psychology and a license in marriage, family and child counseling. Later, she established a private counseling practice and began dedicating her life to helping others experiencing adversity. Unfortunately, the disease caused Gillett to eventually lose her ability to speak as her muscles began to deteriorate. She was forced to discontinue her practice and once again deal with the adversities facing her.

Still, Gillett did not give up. She wrote and published a book, *“Miracles in the Darndest Way,”* and is now writing another. “I have a children’s book about my service dog partly written,” she says. “My writing is my mission project. All of the money I take in goes to various church missions. I let the church decide exactly where.”

Penny Gillett continues to demonstrate the generosity, tenacity, kindness and inspiration that earned her accolades so many years ago and, because of that, her tremendous *Spirit of the Games* continues.

