HONORED VETERAN: DENNIS R. PEGUES

Pleasant Grove, Utah, resident Dennis R. Pegues has spent his lifetime serving others — enlisting in the U.S. Army at age 17 in the midst of the Vietnam war, earning a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a master’s in vocational rehabilitation, and spending much of the last three decades working with troubled youth and disabled veterans. For 64 years, he has given to the communities he’s lived in, from Memphis, Tenn., to Chico, Calif., to Utah.

This year, with Memorial Day fast approaching, the 27th annual Utah Valley University Auto Expo would like to honor him and all our veterans and military. As a result of injuries sustained while serving our country, Dennis was declared 100 percent disabled and housebound by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2006. For four years, he has been on a waiting list to receive a handicap-accessible van, and today, at 11 a.m., UVU automotive students will present Dennis with a van they have spent the past several months refurbishing.

“The most important thing is that this gift will allow me the independence to get out again and help people,” Dennis says. “It’s exciting for me to think that because of the generosity of people, that I’m going to be able to get around and see people. That’s what I’ve missed the most. Right now I can’t leave home without someone being with me to get the scooter out.”

Nearly a dozen UVU automotive students have dedicated hundreds of hours renovating the 2003 Ford Winstar, which was donated by a UVU alum.

Although he has never attended UVU, Dennis has brought many young people to the University. A youth leader in his church, Dennis encouraged many students graduating high school to continue their education at local colleges, including UVU. “I used to take youth to UVU and show them around campus,” Dennis says. “I’d make presentations about getting your education and learning to feel comfortable in a new environment.”

That characteristic of finding a need and filling it is one that Dennis has exercised his entire life. In California, he worked with individuals dealing with acquired brain injuries and helped youth in the juvenile justice system turn their lives around. Later, he tutored students with disabilities at a local community college. He worked extensively with a veteran’s group while attending school at California State University, Chico, where he interned at the local veteran’s center and volunteered on the suicide watch.

“I’ve always worked with social groups, tried to help people overcome their difficulties,” he says. “The reason I went into psychology was to understand myself, and then I found I was good at it. I’ve used my own disability in a positive manner to communicate to others that there is always a way to look at life and see the good.”

Dennis’s wife, Rosie, is a junior pursuing a bachelor’s degree in social studies at UVU, and their son Aaron, who is a member of the Utah National Guard, will enter UVU as a freshman this fall. They are the parents of two other sons, Dennis Jr. and Malcolm, and a daughter, Marlene, as well as four grandsons.

Dennis is looking forward to the independence the van will give him. Dependent on a wheelchair and scooter for the past several years, his activities have been limited by the availability of other people to help him get around and by other factors, like the weather, which sometimes keep him from leaving home. The van will allow him to lift his wheelchair in and out the vehicle and maneuver himself around to the driver’s seat.

“For me, dealing with a degenerative disorder, and for veterans like me, there are some of us who don’t have resources like this, so we’re kind of limited,” Dennis said. “I just want to emphasize how grateful I am. This van will allow me the freedom to more fully participate in life.”

Dennis first contacted the UVU Veteran’s Office in December, when his case manager at the Salt Lake Vocational Rehabilitation center mentioned UVU was looking for someone to donate a van to.

The minivan already had a wheelchair lift installed, but first- and second-year collision repair and automotive technology students replaced the battery and starter and repaired plastic and metal nonstructural damages to the vehicle. Students also refinished and painted the van.

“It’s a good opportunity for these students in the trades program to learn to be engaged in community events, where they’re actually giving back to the community.” said Don Wilson, an automotive technology professor who has overseen the project. “It gives them a sense of pride and ownership in UVU and also a sense of community and civility — basically learning how to be kind.”

(Photos: UVU Automotive students Mason McMillian, Chet Harmer and Brett McCue working on the van)