



### **Message from Adapt A Vet Founder – Roxann Cotugno**

In 2012 during my first home build for a Veteran, Staff Sgt. Shilo Harris, I was working with the TV show “Extreme Makeover.” The goal was to completely remove an existing double-wide mobile home, build a new home, and have it furnished in less than a week.

On day four of the build, my world came crashing down. My grandmother, who was so excited about the show, fell into a coma. My son drove me to Brooks Army Medical Center where the family was all gathered to be with my grandmother in the ICU.

I insisted my husband Mike stay at the build and continue working, since I knew that was what my grandmother would have wanted. Mike and our children joined me in the morning at the hospital.

Around 6 pm on January 12, the hospital staff told us my grandmother had no brain activity left. They suggested we unplug her from life support. We asked them to wait so that family members could get my grandfather’s medicine from the house.

Once my grandpa had his medicine, they unplugged the machine. My grandmother continued to breathe on her own due to all the drugs in her system; hospital staff recommended giving her a different drug to slow her breathing down. It broke my mom’s and aunt’s heart to make that decision.

The nurse left to get the medicine. I kissed my grandmother goodbye and told her it was okay to go and grandpa would be taken care of. I checked the monitor and saw that she finally was letting go. Her heart started to slow down. I grabbed my grandfather’s hand and said “It’s time, hold her hand.” At 8:30 that evening my grandmother went to be with the Lord. Still to this day it hurts like it was yesterday.

Around 10:00 PM that same evening, Mike and I returned to the build site because I knew how much my grandmother loved the show “Extreme Makeover.” I went back to work and we finished the home build in 108 hours and welcomed the Harris family into the home that Saturday evening. The home was dedicated in memory of my grandmother Ruby Mary Pircher. I had a very special relationship with my grandparents since I was a baby.

After my grandmother's funeral, it was decided that my grandfather could not stay in his own home due to two safety issues: one was the bathroom - my grandfather was not going to be able to get in and out of the bathtub without falling. A second safety issue was a safe exit from the back of the house during an emergency – there was no ramp available, a needed adaptation for mobility.

My mom decided to move my grandfather to New Mexico with my aunt and transition him to an assisted living facility. Not only did I lose my grandmother, I was now losing my grandfather who was like my dad. He walked me down the aisle when I got married. He came out of a coma when I laid my firstborn son in his arms at Brook Army Medical Center. The doctors told us he would never walk again. He showed them! When Blaine, my son, started walking, he was walking alongside him.

After my grandfather was moved to another state after always being in the same city as me, I flew or drove with my mom or my family to New Mexico every month after he left.

I spoke with my grandfather on Saturday, January 26, 2013. He had been in the hospital because he needed blood, but he was stronger and getting out of hospital. I had just visited with him for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in six weeks for his 95<sup>th</sup> birthday. On that Sunday night, he went into the nursing home for therapy until he was strong enough to go back to the assisted living facility. On Monday morning, my aunt had not heard from my grandfather so she stopped by to check on him.

The staff said he was still asleep at 10:30 AM. I was in a meeting when my aunt called my husband and told him to get me and my mother on a plane ASAP. Again, my world crashed. I called my mom's office and spoke with her friends there, told them I was on my way to get her and that she wouldn't be at work the rest of the week. Within 2 hours my mom and I were packed and on a plane. We rented a car and drove an hour to Los Alamos. I broke every speed limit I had to get us there before he passed. One year after losing my grandmother, I was losing my grandfather.

In reflecting over the past year, my grandfather lost his wife and later was taken out of his comfort zone. He was taken from his church he had been going to for 40+ years. He had to leave his home after 52+ years because his home was not adapted to fit his abilities and needs – even though he and my family went through all the “right” channels in making the requests for assistance.

My grandfather was 100% disabled; he was a Master Sergeant in the Army. He retired with honors October 31, 1962. It took us 2 long years to get him a ramp from the VA so that he could enter and exit the front of his house safely. My grandparents tried for years to get help to adapt their bathroom so that my grandfather would not continue falling and getting hurt; they also tried to get a deck with a ramp on the back of their home so that he could take out the trash – both daily living chores that allowed him his own respect and dignity. I am sad to say that neither adaptation was ever completed by the organizations from which my grandparents requested assistance.

Really, I lost both my grandparents in 2012. Even though I got to visit with my grandfather, it wasn't the same and neither was he. I still believe today that if my grandfather had been able to remain in

his own home, he would have lived longer than a year after my grandmother passed. He might still be alive today. Tomorrow would have been my grandfather's 98<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I founded Adapt A Vet with my heart. I don't want others to have to go through losing their parents, grandparents, friends, or loved ones the way I lost mine.

My husband and I kept my grandfather's ramp and each time we adapt a home and need temporary ramps, my grandfather is right there to help other disabled Veterans like himself. Each adaptation is in honor of my dad, my grandfather, my hero - Master Sgt. Raymond W. Pircher. My firstborn is named after him and my first grandbaby is named after him as well.

I encourage each of you reading this to help Adapt A Vet rehabilitate homes so that Veterans who are disabled and need their home adapted to fit their abilities and needs can live their life in their own home. We work with volunteers and community supporters during each home rehabilitation to ensure the adaptations meet the Veteran's abilities, keep them safe, and allow them to enjoy the same comfort and simplicities of life that we all do.

Please contribute your time and treasures to show our Veterans who are disabled due to active duty or circumstances that happen after they exit or retire from the military "What Freedom Feels Like in Their Own Homes."

Respectfully,

Roxann M. Cotugno  
Adapt A Vet Founder