

FDR memorial statue inaccurate minus wheelchair, activists say

By Carl Weiser Gannett News Service

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Photo Caption: Jim Dickson, left, wearing sunglasses, director of the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign, and folk singer Ron Guttenberg, with guitar, sing a song written by Guttenberg about President Roosevelt's disability during a rally Thursday at the construction entrance to the memorial to Roosevelt being constructed in Washington, D.C.

WASHINGTON - Holding up signs reading "Truth," disabled activists Thursday demanded that the nearly completed Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial add a statue showing the president in his wheelchair.

"It is a memorial to the ages. Should it not be honest? Should it not be accurate?" said Michael Deland, chairman of the National Organization on Disability. "It would be unconscionable for children to visit and not know FDR was in a wheelchair."

About 50 disabled activists rallied with Deland at the construction site of the memorial. Rising between the Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, it will feature four open-air "rooms," each devoted to one of Roosevelt's terms and each featuring a statue of Roosevelt or his wife Eleanor.

None of the statues show Roosevelt in the wheelchair he used after being stricken with polio at age 39. He could not walk unaided for the last 24 years of his life, including his entire presidency.

If the commission doesn't agree to add a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair, protest leader Jim Dickson promised "trouble" on May 2, the day the memorial is dedicated. Another activist said he would chain himself to the White House gate.

"If we have to, we'll block the blooming construction site." said Deland.

Dorann Gunderson, executive director of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial Commission, said President Clinton will be delivering the dedication address. The date depends on the construction schedule.

Gunderson noted the memorial will feature a replica of one of FDR's wheelchairs in its visitor center. The originals were all too fragile to move, she said.

There will be postcards of Roosevelt in his wheelchair.

Roosevelt himself took great pains to hide his disability from the public. Of 125,000 photographs of him, only two show him in a wheelchair.

The commission insists it is only honoring Roosevelt's wishes. Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, who co-chairs the commission with retired Oregon Sen. Mark Hatfield, has said Roosevelt "considered his disability a very private matter."

But protester Hugh Gallagher, a wheelchair user who wrote a biography of Roosevelt, said: "If Franklin Roosevelt were alive today, he would be here" with the protesters.