

INSISTING ON FDR IN WHEELCHAIR

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By DeNeen L. Brown

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About 150 demonstrators shouting, "Don't hide FDR's source of strength," gathered at the site of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt memorial yesterday to demand that a statue of the president sitting in his wheelchair be included.

Without a depiction of the president in a wheelchair, the activists said, the memorial is a sham.

The design of the memorial, which is scheduled to open May 2, includes fountains, granite walls with inscriptions of the president's famous words and statues of the president standing. But nowhere on the 7 1/2-acre site in West Potomac Park is planned a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair. Roosevelt lived the last 24 years of his life disabled by polio.

"Hiding FDR's disability is an affront to every American with and without a disability," said Jim Dickson, director of the FDR in a Wheelchair Campaign. "FDR led the nation through the Great Depression, to victory in World War II and he did so from wheelchair."

Evan J. Kemp Jr., chairman of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission during the Bush administration, said yesterday that if the memorial commission fails to include a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair, he and other activists "will be chaining ourselves to the White House gates."

The National Council on Disability has been asking for several years that the FDR Commission, which is planning and building the memorial under authority from Congress, add a statue depicting Roosevelt in a wheelchair.

Members of the FDR Commission have argued that Roosevelt was an intensely private man who went through great efforts to hide his disability. It would be wrong, they say, to depict him in a wheelchair.

"Of the 10 sculptures in the memorial, three depict the public persons of FDR as president, commander in chief and world leader," Sen. Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii), a commission member, wrote recently.

"These FDR sculptures were inspired by real-life situations, and they show the president as he actually appeared at the time, seated, without a wheelchair or crutches present. This is, of course, the way FDR deliberately and painstakingly presented himself to the public."

Members of the commission say that Roosevelt's disability will not be excluded from the memorial. His disability will be depicted in a timeline of his life engraved in granite; National Park Service literature will discuss his disability; photographs of the president in his wheelchair will be displayed, and a replica of one of Roosevelt's wheelchairs will be exhibited at the visitor center at the memorial site.

But many activists for the disabled said yesterday that a statue of Roosevelt in a wheelchair is essential to the memorial. "Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a wheelchair user," said Justin Dart, chairman of the President's Committee on Employment of People with Disabilities during the Bush administration. "It

will be an obscene and expensive distortion of history if our national FDR monument does not depict him in his wheelchair." I. King Jordan, president of Gallaudet University, told the crowd, many of whom sat in wheelchairs, that the memorial needs to show the "real FDR."

"The source of his courage was in fact his disability," Jordan said. "If this memorial has no depiction of him in a wheelchair, instead of a depiction of a great American, it becomes a depiction of hypocrisy."

CAPTION: Gallaudet University President I. King Jordan, left, shakes hand of Justin Dart, an activist for the disabled, at the protest.

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