



In an area of Wisconsin where corn and soybeans normally kiss the edges of the road, there now stands a 60-foot-wide sunflower strip – 4.5 miles long. A man honoring his late wife planted these sunflowers to remember her love and beauty.

Andrzejczak's hospital room was filled with flowers, plants and cards and it took away from his gloom and the gloominess of the sterile room.



Andrzejczak said, "I didn't know anything about horticultural therapy when I got home. I discovered that HT existed, and being in the Assembly and supporting NJ Horticultural Therapy Week to build awareness, I saw its benefits. It's great and it is a no-brainer. This should have been done a long time ago." (Photo: ~Courtesy of Assembly Office of Bob Andrzejczak)

U.S. Army Sergeant Bob Andrzejczak was in charge of providing security as the Rear Gunner sitting in a turret, covering the rear of the entire convoy when they were attacked with an armor-piercing grenade during his second deployment 2008 in Bayjim, Iraq.

In an attempt to save his men while on patrol driving down Market Street, Andrzejczak unhinged himself from his harness and crawled to the back of the truck to make sure all his men were okay. He was the only one severely wounded. He knew it was bad, but his priority was to let everyone know that he was okay. He was flown to Walter Reed hospital in Washington, D.C., where he underwent seven surgeries. He lost his leg in the first two weeks and spent months there on the arduous journey to recovery.

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"I wanted to get home. I wanted to be in a better environment. I wanted to garden. Gardening helped me take on my thoughts and to help me process what happened at my own pace. Gardening saved my life," he said in a phone interview.

In 2013, Andrzejczak was elected to the New Jersey General Assembly D-District 1. He is chairman of the Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee, and serves on the Military and Veteran's Affairs Committee. A resident of Middle Township, Andrzejczak is a Lower Township Cape May County native.

Andrzejczak was an active service member of the United States Army for five years, from 2005 to 2010. He was also awarded the Bronze Star for service during his first tour of duty, and the Purple Heart during a ceremony while he was recovering at the medical center. Andrzejczak is growing a family; married to Tricia, they have a son, who just turned four this month, and a 10-month old daughter. He is often seen with his service dog, "Maddy," a yellow lab, and he is a supporter of horticultural therapy (HT).

"Horticultural Therapy is not new," Andrzejczak said.

When injured World War II veterans were admitted to veteran hospitals, physicians used on-site gardens, donated and planted by garden clubs and horticultural businesses, specifically for purposes of rehabilitation. The professional field of horticultural therapy began in 1973. The American Horticultural Therapy Association defines it as the engagement of a client in horticultural activities facilitated by a trained and Registered Horticultural Therapist to achieve specific and documented treatment goals. Gardens and programs can be found around the United States for veterans and active service personnel.

Andrzejczak said, "Government departments are encouraging veterans to get involved. It's not just the veteran going through their circumstances but loved ones, a spouse, the wife, who is not coping with everything as well as she wishes. HT can provide an outlet for veterans to process their thoughts, for families to come together, and offer many benefits as part of agriculture and horticulture such as fresh air, nature, exercise, working the injury, and being connected."

"The application in vocation in applying for a job, for example," he added. "Infantry skills and experience needed for combat don't really translate into work at the end of a military career. Through horticultural therapy one can learn skills, gain employment in the green industry or start a business. As far as costs for horticultural therapy, it makes sense to put a program together when it comes to veterans. The benefits outweigh the initial

investment. Horticultural therapy offers opportunity for husband, wife and kids to spend time together and not focus on their depression and circumstances.”

The stigma of physical disfigurement, anxiety, depression and mental health disorders for many veterans is real, and with every war a percentage of veterans sustain injuries that last for decades after discharge. A survey by the American Psychiatric Association found that more than one-third of military members and spouses under the age of 55 reported frequent feelings of anxiety (military member 38 percent, military spouse 39 percent) and depression (military member 40 percent, military spouse 33 percent).

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