

'He Was Worth Fighting For'

VFW Accredited Service Officer helps veteran impacted by Agent Orange get his long-awaited benefits

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Kenneth “Ken” Gittings enlisted in the Army in 1965 because he believed it was his duty to serve. He deployed to Vietnam for a year. Soon after returning home, he met Sandra, and they were married within months.

“It was really quick,” Sandra said. “We fell in love and wanted to be with each other.”

They settled in Oakville, Connecticut, and built a life together. It’s where Ken worked the same job for 39 years and where they raised their two daughters. It’s also where they came to understand Agent Orange and its effect on veterans like Ken.

“Way back in the ’80s, Ken received a letter from the VA,” Sandra explained. “They were doing Agent Orange screenings, so he went to the VA hospital. When he came home, he said they’d asked him a couple of questions, and that was about it.”

Ken had no other interaction with the VA until around 2012, when he retired and needed hearing aids. From then on, Ken had regular checkups at the VA.

During a 2018 visit, a doctor noticed Ken’s scarred back and neck and asked him if he knew he had chloracne. Ken had suffered from a severe skin condition for decades but struggled to find answers. He had never heard of chloracne. The doctor explained that it is caused by Agent Orange exposure. When Ken returned home, Sandra looked the condition up online.

“I looked at the images and thought, ‘Oh, my God,’” she recalled. “It was one and the same.”

Sandra could not understand why it took so long for a VA doctor to mention the condition.

“They must have seen other veterans with it. How do you not know, as a doctor of the VA, that this is chloracne?” she said.

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Ken filed a claim, but it was denied. He was told he should have filed it within a year of returning home from Vietnam. But Sandra pointed out that the connection between Agent Orange and chloracne was not discovered until the 1990s.

Ken saw two other doctors, who confirmed he had chloracne and filed a second claim. He was denied again.

“Now I’m angry,” Sandra said. “Ken could have let it go, but I told him, ‘It’s not right. You were there, you served, and now you have poison in your body.’”

With help from the VFW’s National Veterans Service and Service Office Claims Consultant Linda Ciccone, Ken and Sandra filed an appeal in 2019.

“Linda sat in our hearing for chloracne, so if there was anything that needed to be said or signed, she was there for us,” Sandra explained.

Eventually, the disability was approved, but while awaiting a decision, Ken was diagnosed with lung cancer.

“That’s poison in him, and I didn’t know that all these years. If I had, we would have had a chest X-ray. Maybe we could have done more,” Sandra said.

By the time Ken knew he had cancer, it was terminal. He underwent chemotherapy to slow its progression. Even then, the VA encouraged Ken to get a second opinion. Otherwise, they warned, his new claim might be delayed.

“I told them he’s already in treatment. I don’t think the VA hospital would be giving him chemotherapy if he didn’t have cancer,” Sandra said. “I just don’t know why they’re not more willing to help.”

Sandra spent as much time with Ken as she could over the next several months.

“I knew I was on borrowed time with him,” she said. “There were days that were long, but the year went by fast.”

On one especially bad day, Sandra took Ken to the hospital. Doctors informed them he had only a few weeks left.

“We sat there, and I said, ‘Ken, I’m really sorry.’ He said to me, ‘It wasn’t the news I wanted to hear, but I’ve been so blessed,’” Sandra recalled.

Ken passed away in February 2022. His official cause of death was Agent Orange exposure. Sandra is angry, thinking back to his screening more than 30 years ago and the VA’s lack of action. But she is thankful for Ciccone’s help and support and is trying to remain positive.

“I can’t say enough good about Linda. She’s wonderful,” Sandra said. “Every day I say, ‘I’m blessed for this. I’m blessed for that.’ I’m trying to think like Ken did.”

In addition to the chloracne, Ken filed claims for several other service-connected conditions. Sandra is still awaiting one decision. Although the journey has been a difficult one, she has no regrets about the time and energy spent battling on Ken’s behalf.

“I was never going to give up on him,” she said. “I loved him. He was worth fighting for.”

[Learn more about the VFW's National Veterans Service \(NVS\) program.](#)