

VFW Honors Teachers Who Bring Vets to the Classroom

Educators who won the Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award received \$1,000 for professional development expenses, while their respective schools accepted \$1,000

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VFW has presented more than 60 educators with its Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Award since 1999. This year's recipients spoke at the 120th VFW National Convention in Orlando, Fla., thanking VFW for the award and sharing how they bring veterans and their stories into the classroom.

Bobbie Schamens | Grade level K-5 | Meadowview Intermediate School | Sparta, Wis.

Bobbie Schamens, a fourth-grade teacher at Meadowview Intermediate School in Sparta, Wis., organizes a military tribute at the school and invites families to submit items to honor those who have served. Her students also make cards to send with military care packages. She said receiving the VFW award is a “humbling” experience.

“I just consider myself a regular teacher [who] just does things to support her students, families and those within our community, especially our military families and our veterans,” Schamens said. “So I was quite taken aback by it and surprised, but feel very honored and blessed to have received this award.”

Schamens, whose husband served in the Air Force, started working on the military tribute in 2012. Schamens said she asks her fourth- and fifth-grade students to bring in military items from their families to feature in the display. Over the years, the display has included dog tags, Purple Hearts, pieces of uniforms, letters and photographs.

“It’s really powerful to see the kids stop, look and think, as well as the adults who come by and look at that and have that moment of recognition and pride and respect for [veterans],”

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Schamens said.

In the classroom, Schamens shares information about the honor and freedoms the military provides and demonstrates proper flag etiquette. She explains the meaning of the Pledge of Allegiance and reads patriotic children's stories, such as "I Pledge Allegiance" by Pat Mora and Libby Martinez and "Blue Sky White Star" by Sarvinder Naberhaus.

Schamens also teaches a "mini unit" on the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, and discusses Veterans Day and the origin of "Taps." In recent years, she has invited military parents to the classroom to share their stories. She said that helps students see veterans and active-duty servicemembers as more than "somebody in a uniform."

"They start to realize that that person is a person," Schamens said. "They have a family. And that's their job. They get a different sense of pride for the people who walk around [their community]."

Schamens also has assisted with the paper star display honoring veterans in the school's cafeteria. She was sponsored by VFW Post 2112 in Sparta, Wis., and said she would like to put the award funds toward a "long-lasting" effort that will benefit students and the community.

Anne Martin | Grade level 6-8 | Earl E. Williams Middle School | Tracy, Calif.

Anne Martin has been a seventh-grade teacher at Williams Middle School for 24 years, but receiving the Smart/Maher teacher award left the Gold Star family member "flabbergasted."

"It made me cry," Martin said. "I still get teary. I was just overwhelmed and very honored."

Martin's nephew, Gunnery Sgt. George L. Figone Jr., of the 2nd Marine Special Operations Bn., who died in Afghanistan in 2011, was like a brother to her.

"My parents raised him," Martin said, "and he was a Marine and he was injured in action and then died later from complications to his wound. [Our] family's always been a very strong supporter of the military, so there was that aspect to [receiving the award] as well. But mainly because it made me think of Georgie."

Sponsored by VFW Post 1537 in Tracy, Calif., Martin organizes schoolwide troop donations, thank-you letter campaigns, essay contests and the school's annual Patriot Day celebration.

In her advisor role with the school's student government/leadership group Associated Student Body (ASB), Martin spearheads a patriotic spirit and door-decorating contest, rock painting for the local VA hospital and a "chain of thanks" for Post 1537.

Martin said she started organizing military-related events and activities after the Sept. 11,

2001, terror attacks. It was at that time that students began creating the “chain of thanks” to send to those serving in Afghanistan and Iraq. The chains also have been used at the local VFW Post during a Veterans Day celebration.

Such activities give students a chance to “look outside of themselves,” according to Martin.

“The fact that they’re here going to school is really a privilege because of the [men and women who served our country],” Martin said.

During ASB elections, students complete tasks such as writing campaign speeches and seek out teacher recommendations. As part of that event, Martin imparts that the privilege of voting is paid for by the sacrifices of many. She also spearheads the school’s involvement in VFW’s Patriot’s Pen contest.

Martin hopes to use the award funds to take her leadership class on a team-building exercise and to purchase supplies for the students to do more rock painting.

Kevin Allen Wagner | Grade 9-12 | Carlisle High School | Carlisle, Pa.

Kevin Wagner, an 11th grade advanced-placement U.S. history teacher at Carlisle High School in Carlisle, Pa., said he was “deeply honored” to receive the VFW award.

“I had already learned that I was the state winner, which in and of itself is quite an honor, but to be recognized at a national level just means so much more, obviously, and kind of validates the work that I’ve been doing with veterans and veterans organizations over the years,” Wagner said.

He has presented the program, “Telling the Stories of America’s Silent Heroes,” at three national conferences. The program began in 2012, after a trip to Normandy the year prior.

Fifteen teachers, and one student per teacher, visited Normandy the year prior to study the D-Day invasion. His student, Sam Spare, was asked to research a soldier buried at Normandy.

“[We ended up] finding out that a Carlisle High School graduate was buried at Normandy that nobody knew the story about,” Wagner said.

Wagner replicated that experience in his AP U.S. history class by having students study one veteran buried at Normandy over the course of the year. By the end of the year, students complete a website in honor of their chosen service member.

He has since created a national guide for educators to implement similar projects. Most recently, his search for Carlisle High School alumni who served in the Vietnam War revealed that from 1960-75, the school’s yearbooks failed to mention the war or those who served.

“There is no plaque or recognition in our high school for the Vietnam era,” Wagner said. “We have one for all the other wars. We even have one for Afghanistan and Iraq for a young man that was killed.”

He has since worked with students and the community to locate information about local veterans who served during that time.

“That was kind of the impetus to say, ‘It’s a long time in coming,’ and something needed to be done to rectify that. That was the flashpoint,” Wagner said.

In May 2018, more than 200 names were inscribed on a plaque outside the high school’s auditorium. Wagner said he intends to use the award funds to add more than 50 names to the school’s Vietnam Veterans Wall of Honor that was unveiled last year.

Sponsored by VFW Post 477 in Carlisle, Pa., Wagner also serves as program chair for the social studies department and organizes the local National History Day program.

This article is featured in the October 2019 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by Kari Williams, associate editor for VFW magazine.