

‘It’s a Special Feeling’

After refurbishing several local veterans’ memorials, one VFW member is awarded ‘Man of the Year’

Oct 16, 2025

Located about 35 miles north of the Oregon border in Washington state and home to about 85,000 is the city of Kennewick, a vibrant residential and banking community. This past February, VFW Post 5785 member and Marine vet Kevin Veleke was recognized as the “Kennewick Man of the Year” after having restored four local veteran memorial sites.

The organization behind the award, the Kennewick Man & Woman of the Year, has been recognizing exceptional public service since 1946. The honor is given to individuals who have provided service to the Kennewick community where no compensation was given and is only applicable to those who live and/or work in Kennewick.

Born and raised in the Seattle area, Veleke attended Washington State University and graduated in 1968 with a B.A. degree in marketing. He began his service in the Marines shortly thereafter, and in the fall of 1969, was stationed in Phu Bai, South Vietnam, as an aviation supply officer for Marine Base Squadron-36.

After returning home, Veleke lived and worked in several areas of the country before settling back in Washington. He worked as an insurance broker for an independent insurance agency in Richland, Washington, while living in Kennewick.

A COMMITMENT TO REMEMBRANCE

Over the years, several veterans’ memorials in Kennewick had become overgrown, neglected and even vandalized, with some having gone without maintenance for decades. Looking to honor the sites and the memory of all those who served, Veleke took it upon himself to refurbish the memorials.

Last year, he began his restoration efforts at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Park in Kennewick, where he pruned overgrown flowers around the memorial and helped replace the flagpole, which had been vandalized a few years prior. Veleke reached out to a friend with the proper equipment and other citizens of Kennewick to successfully install the new

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111

Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002

Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

flagpole.

Veleke then turned his attention to the Regional Veteran's Memorial, located at Kennewick's Columbia Park. Centered at the memorial is a tall monument dedicated to each of the military services surrounded by 18 in-ground lights — 16 of which hadn't been working. Veleke took the initiative to raise the money needed to buy and install new lights at the memorial, allowing for the monument to be lit up in the evening once again.

Marine Cpl. Gerald Carmichael, the first man from Kennewick to have been killed in Vietnam, had a commemorative pyramid and street named after him. According to Veleke, the pyramid hadn't been refurbished in more than 60 years. A total of \$30,000, raised by Veleke, went into the equipment and labor costs needed to lay the concrete necessary to restore the pyramid, as well as add a wall behind the memorial.

Veleke's most recent project involved restoring an American Auxiliary pyramid, which had been installed in 1968, as well as a VFW wall monument, which was installed in 1985.

"Neither of these memorials were being maintained by anyone," Veleke said. He was able to raise \$25,000 to help restore both memorial sites.

'IT'S SPECIAL TO BE ASSOCIATED WITH VERY GOOD PEOPLE'

The award came as a surprise to him, when his wife informed him one day that they were invited to the Kennewick Man of the Year ceremony.

"I had no knowledge why," Veleke said. "The award was a complete surprise."

At the ceremony, when Veleke was announced as the winner, 200 attendees came out of an adjacent room to congratulate him, including past Kennewick Man and Woman of the Year recipients, members of his church, employees of the Kennewick school district, members of VFW Post 5785 and an honor guard dressed in uniform.

"It was a sight to see," Veleke added.

He was nominated for the Kennewick Man of the Year award by past recipients Kirk Williamson, who had won it in 2000, and Bob Kelly, an Army veteran who had won it in 2015.

"It's a special feeling to be associated with very good people," Veleke said when asked about his feelings toward the award.

Veleke's fellow Post members also are active in the community. They help perform flag ceremonies for Kennewick, attend parades, provide military funeral honors at veteran

funerals, provide emergency assistance to veterans and support the local JROTC program.

Veleke serves as the liaison at his Post for young Marines in the area. He was able to work with a group of Marines to help restore the 62 names engraved on one of the veterans' monuments in Kennewick.

“It’s very rewarding for me to see young men and women doing this kind of volunteer work,” Veleke said. “I hope I can inspire others to engage with other young Marines in their area.”

This article is featured in the 2025 September/October issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Danny Cook](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.