

'You Know You've Made a Connection'

The winners of the 2025 Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Teacher Award are honored as patriotic role models for their students

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While on stage to accept her award for the 2025 Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Award at the 2025 VFW National Convention in Columbus, Ohio, high school English teacher Nicole Petrosillo told the audience: "I fully grasp the role I have as an educator today. I acknowledge the broader platform I have to help students understand patriotism, democracy and citizenship."

2025 Smart/Maher VFW National Citizenship Education Award co-winners Tim Smiddy, at the elementary school level, and Christie Wingo, at the middle school level, share a similar sentiment. Their goal: to inform students about the sacrifices of service members, teach them how to be productive and kind members of their community and to recognize the freedoms U.S. citizens enjoy because of those who served.

'THE REACTION FROM OUR KIDS WAS UNBELIEVABLE'

Hailing from Staunton, Illinois, and sponsored by VFW Post 1241, Smiddy, a Staunton Elementary School teacher, created the "Patriot's Club." Founded nearly 30 years ago, the purpose of the club is to stress the importance of American history and to recognize the efforts of all those who served throughout the nation's history.

"Our Patriot's Club is focused on patriotism," Smiddy said during his acceptance speech at the 2025 VFW National Convention in August.

The club has grown to become a favorite among students. Club activities include singing songs of American history, performing skits, square dancing and the narration of historical events.

Each year, the club continues to grow. Students get the opportunity to meet with service members and have gotten to broadcast their activities to submarine crews around the world.

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“The reaction from our kids has been unbelievable,” Smiddy said. “We had about 88 (members) in fifth grade this last year.”

The Patriot’s Club is funded entirely by veterans and teachers.

“One mother said her kid was up at 5 a.m. because he was so excited to attend the Patriot’s Club,” Smiddy said. “When you see kids up there and they’re crying, you know you’ve made a connection.”

‘I KNOW MY GRANDFATHER WOULD BE PROUD’

Wingo, a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) instructor at Colorado Springs Christian School in Colorado Springs, Colorado, teaches her students citizenship and how to positively benefit their communities through technology and innovation.

A former Boeing engineer who previously collaborated with NASA and who was sponsored by VFW Post 7829 in Monument, Colorado, Wingo comes from a military family. Her father served from 1967-71 with the 313th Army Security Agency and has a grandfather who also served.

“I know my grandfather would be proud to see me standing here among all of you,” Wingo said during her acceptance speech at the 2025 VFW National Convention.

Wingo says “grit and resilience” is her focus in her lessons.

“In STEM, we focus on the engineering design process,” Wingo said. “Students learn that failure is as much a part of the process as success.”

Wingo’s lessons have covered the process behind prosthetic limb creation, as well as 3D modeling and printing. She coordinates opportunities for students to travel to amusement parks to learn more about topics such as terminal velocity. Wingo also takes a group of 25 students to Phoenix, Arizona, each year to participate in the International Christian STEM Competition (ICSC).

“I am blessed to serve this next generation of innovators and community leaders,” Wingo said.

‘I CHALLENGE MY STUDENTS TO WALK WITH PASSION, BUT ALSO KINDNESS’

Petrosillo believes it is her duty as a teacher to inform kids of the sacrifices of those who served and to recognize the freedoms we have because of those sacrifices.

“It is my duty, obligation and honor to uphold this platform,” Petrosillo said during her acceptance speech.

An English teacher from West Milford Township High School in West Milford, New Jersey, and who was sponsored by Post 7198 in Hewitt, New Jersey, Petrosillo grew up with a father who served in the Air Force.

“It wasn’t until I was much older that I fully grasped what it meant,” Petrosillo said, “what their sacrifice and their service cost to their families.”

Petrosillo’s English classes involve exploring and expanding upon the experiences of veterans, including the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). One of her courses, Psychology in Literature, covers “Unbroken,” a novel that thoroughly covers themes of PTSD.

Serving as the committee leader for War and Remembrance Day at her school, Petrosillo is an integral piece to military and veteran support programs at Township High. She believes that all teachers should strive to teach students the values of patriotism and service to their communities.

Petrosillo finished her acceptance speech by saying, “I challenge my students to walk with passion, but also kindness.”

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