

Providing an Honorable Tribute

Army veteran's service to country comes full circle with role at WDVA



Lee Kelley formed an unforgettable bond with those who surrounded him while serving in the U.S. Army. After being honorably discharged in 2004, he searched to find that camaraderie once again. It was quite the process, but he didn't have to look too far to find it.

Kelley, the program manager of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs' Military Funeral Honors Program, said his transition to civilian life after serving in the military was challenging in a variety of ways. Once he found his sense of purpose again, things became easier.

"I always knew I wanted to serve in

some way, fashion or form," Kelley said. "I talked with some of the people who experienced the same struggles I did finding my niche and it was suggested to seek out a couple veteran job fairs to see what's out there."

Kelley heeded that advice, meeting a mentor who helped steer his career back the way he once envisioned when he was younger.

"She (Marcea Wiess) wrote a book (*Leaving the Military; Your Deployment Guide to Corporate America*) about service members transitioning into civilian life," Kelley said. "Once I met Marcea, I started

realizing that I can make some ground here and make an impact. Along with that I was serving families. Once I put two and two together and honed in on that craft, it was easy."

A visit to the WDVA's Southern Wisconsin Veterans Memorial Cemetery, the fifth busiest state veterans' cemetery in the country, reinvigorated Kelley with the sense of pride and accomplishment he once felt by serving his country after high school. He aspired to give back to veterans as best as he could and held numerous positions, including serving as a government contractor in Iraq, before

working as a coordinator for the WDVA's Military Funeral Honors Program.

The WDVA's Military Funeral Honors Program provides a final tribute to the men and women who served in the military through honor guard teams. The mission of the program is to provide and coordinate the appropriate final tribute to eligible Wisconsin veterans, acknowledging their faithful and honorable service to our nation.

After about two years, Kelley was promoted to supervisor, taking over for Gary Dierks, who now serves as the director of the WDVA's Bureau of Veterans Cemeteries. Kelley now oversees the program and his team of four coordinators, all who actively serve or have served in the military.

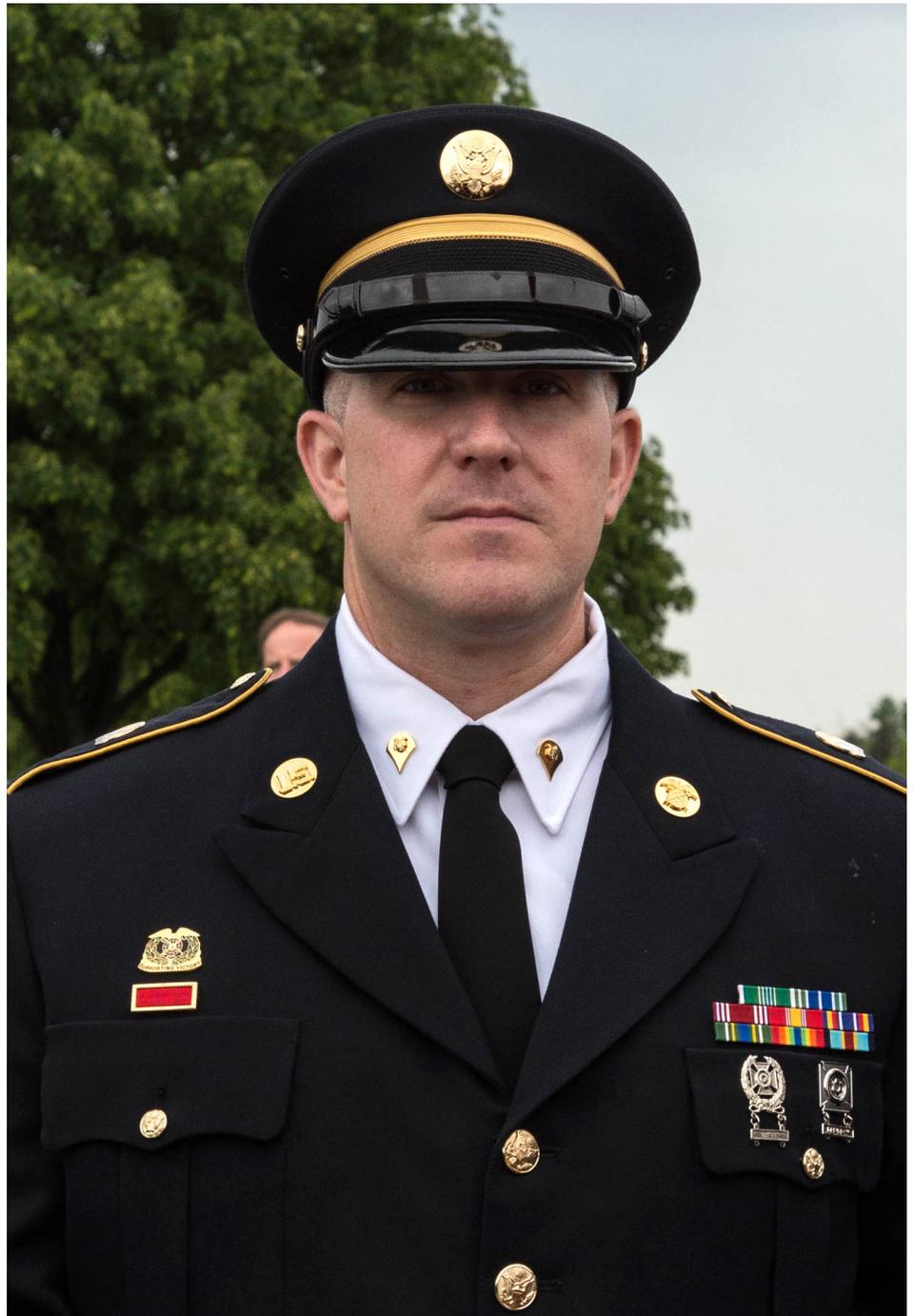
With such a large undertaking, staff have built relationships with more than 500 veterans' service organizations across the state, many volunteering their time to pay tribute to their fellow veterans. Last year, the program supported more than 7,300 services for Wisconsin's veterans.

"Each day, it's important to reflect on and remember that we stand on the shoulders of giants who have come before us," Kelley said. "When we render our final salute, we make the promise that you and your dedicated service will not be forgotten."

Kelley said he feels a great reward knowing he is continuing to give back to his country — even after wearing the uniform — and those who honorably served it. One of the favorite parts of Kelley's job is working with veterans, families and various organizations on such an important mission, he added.

"Having the opportunity to thank veterans for their service is a true honor," he said.

The WDVA also offers a No Next of Kin program, which calls on staff and those in the surrounding community to attend services honoring a veteran who didn't have any surviving family. For more information on the Military Funeral Honors Program and the No Next of Kin program, visit bit.ly/WDVAHonors.



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- Lee Kelley