

Kaiden Williams wasn't seeking recognition when the idea hit him.

Instead, the New Hope High School sophomore merely wanted to do something kind for Vietnam veteran Jerry King after he heard him speak at the school's Veteran's Day program Nov. 13, 2023.

After hearing King say he was a "Jeep man," Williams had a notion what he was going to do. First, though, he needed to talk to King's daughter, Angie Edge, one of his teachers at New Hope High. Williams needed to learn more about the type of jeep King drove in Vietnam and find some pictures so his creativity could take flight.

Once Williams located the pictures, he put the 3-D printer he has at his home to work. The by-product of Williams' imagination and kindness is a gray Army jeep that he presented to King on Friday at New Hope High.

"I just wanted to give him something to show my appreciation," Williams said. "I just thought, 'Hey, I can do something for him' and I have a 3-D printer, so I started thinking about things I could do. I asked Mrs. Edge what his favorite truck was to drive there during the war, and I found some files and printed them out."

King, who was drafted and served one tour in Vietnam from 1966-68, was one of nearly 30 veterans from all branches of the

military who spoke at New Hope High's Veteran's Day program this school year. New Hope High counselor Billy Lee and library media specialist Lindsey Beck organized the event as one of several the school has planned for this school year to earn Military Star status.

King spoke to two classes at the event and told students many soldiers who returned home after their tours didn't receive much recognition. That left an impression on Williams, who said he wanted to give King something to show his appreciation for his service to his country.

Needless to say, King was surprised when Edge showed him pictures of the Jeep.

"I thought it was amazing when Angie sent me the picture of it," said King, who worked in transportation in the Army and now lives in Starkville with his wife. "I spent a lot of hours in the jeep as a Specialist 4. I drove a lieutenant around. We were the same age, but he went to ROTC and came out as a second lieutenant, so we rode all over South Vietnam in one of these babies (pointing to the jeep). We had some scary times, and we had a lot of good times in it."

Some of the parts of Williams' Jeep came out of the 3-D printer gray, while others – like the wheels and accessories – were white, so they had to be painted. Williams had to print the parts of the jeep -- the seats (which pop out), the steering wheel, the wheels, the gas can attached to the back, the windshield –

individually – and assemble them. He also had to melt parts together with a soldering iron to make it look as realistic as possible. On the hood of the vehicle, Williams wrote King’s name and his years of service.

Williams said he has made some money selling other 3-D printouts at school. He is currently working on an Iron Man suit, which includes a helmet with eyes and a circular chest part that light up. He wore the helmet for Halloween and won first place in a costume contest.

But Williams is especially proud of the Jeep because he knows it shows his appreciation for King and the other men and women for their service.

“I never could have pictured in my mind what it was going to look like,” Edge said. “Kaiden is often a very unassuming student. He doesn’t say a whole lot, but he is brilliant. He has made me several little things, but this is beyond that.

“As his teacher, this is so nice that he heard something my dad said in both classes and he took the time and put in the effort – it was probably a month-long process of him talking with me, looking for what he wanted, making sure he had what he wanted and then painting it. It looks almost like a little trophy.”