He was seen as a visionary by community leaders and veterans alike.

But if you were to give credit to the late Vernon Valenzuela, he’d instead give it to the countless veterans he sought to help.

“It’s enormously important to honor those that have served...” said Vernon in 2011. “But what I’m doing is I’m representing the thousands and thousands of veterans of Kern County. I’m just a representative.”

A representative, indeed. But one that left a lasting legacy, for many saw Vernon, the Vietnam combat veteran, as critical force in helping veterans over several decades once he returned home from the Army.

Although the Bakersfield native wasn't welcomed with open arms or droves of supporters (as many other Vietnam veterans had similarly experienced), the Purple Heart recipient was ready for the next milestone in his life: his education.

He enrolled at Bakersfield College in 1970, becoming the first in his family to attend college.

Seeing the need to serve others like him on campus, the newly minted Renegade quickly founded the Associated Veterans Student Club. This is when his veteran advocacy began, never to cease. And his desire to serve grew more, as he became the BC Student Body President soon thereafter.

“I don’t know if there was ever really a decision (to become a veterans' activist),” Vernon said in 2011. “When I got out of the military – Vietnam was a very confusing time for me, and for many people. And I went to Bakersfield Community College and got involved in the vets club up there; I just got involved in it, and never really got away.”

Vernon went on to earn his AA in Psychology and transferred to CSUB. After getting his Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology, he earned his Master’s Degree in Counseling Education in 1977. By 1979, he was licensed in Marriage & Family Therapy, specializing in the treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. For Vernon, this career allowed him to help veterans coping PTSD as they made their own transitions from life in combat to life back home.

At one point, he returned to Bakersfield College to work as an assistant to the Office of Veteran’s Affairs branch at BC, then as a counselor to war veterans in Kern County and Los Angeles.

“Vernon was determined to try to do something for all veterans in Kern County and in the United States,” said Kern County Superior Court Judge Michael Lewis in 2012. “Vernon understood them. That, I think, is the big difference.”

Lewis, a Marine veteran, shared these sentiments while he reflected on Vernon’s life when he passed away after a long battle with cancer in 2012. He was 63.

Jenny Frank, another colleague of Vernon’s, called him a “visionary.”

Many would agree for like many Renegades before and after him, Vernon dedicated his life to service
of others. He counseled hundreds of veterans over the decades, from Vietnam veterans to Iraq and Afghanistan vets, and all in between. Through his sheer force of will and desire to do more, he was instrumental in getting a Vet Center built here in Kern County in 2010. This center now serves as a place for combat veterans and their families to get the counseling that Vernon’s generation never had access to.

He, and others, established the Veterans Justice Program, offering veterans who get in trouble with the law a second chance by ensuring they receive access to mental health and substance abuse programs.

Over his four decades of service, Vernon touched the lives of many at Bakersfield College, in the city of Bakersfield, and the county of Kern. Some of those young veterans he touched now work at Bakersfield College, helping their fellow veterans, just as he would have wanted. Rarely is a name mentioned that evokes such an emotional response as that of Vernon Valenzuela. There is a reason for that. Rarely is someone as selfless and as serving as Vernon Valenzuela. It was for this reason that Congressman Kevin McCarthy paid tribute to him on the floor of the United States House of Representatives in March 2012 commenting that, “His selflessness, perseverance, and service-minded dedication will continue to serve as an inspiration in our community and remain a constant reminder we must all continue to have of our commitment to the men and women in the Armed Forces who bravely serve our country.”

Vernon never stopped serving and even after his death, his legacy remains as strong as ever, ingrained in the many lives he touched and mentored. As he himself said, “Serving your country has no discharge date.”

A year before his death, he wrote “Veterans continue to serve our community, often quietly, not seeking any recognition, simply content to do the right thing.”

And that is why we are here before you today: to honor someone who was often quiet, selfless, yet passionate and content in doing the right thing for veterans.

Kern Community College District board members:

A new center is being built as we speak. A center dedicated to the education and betterment of our veterans who have served us so faithfully. As befitting a lifetime of service, it is my honor and privilege as President of Bakersfield College to respectfully request that the new Veteran Resource Center be named the Bakersfield College Vernon Valenzuela Veteran Resource Center. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.