



2024 Governor's Volunteerism & Community Service Awards Ceremony

November 20, 2024
Virginia's Executive Mansion

About the Awards

People across Virginia make a difference in the lives of others, every day. Individuals, groups, and organizations invest their time and talent in helping others and creating positive change right where they live. In ways big and small, volunteers serve others in a multitude of ways – often without fanfare or recognition. Presented by the Governor’s Office, the Secretary of Health and Human Resources, Serve Virginia, the Governor’s Advisory Board on Service & Volunteerism, and the Virginia Service Foundation, these awards recognize and celebrate the impact of Virginia’s outstanding volunteers.

For 30 years, the Governor’s Volunteerism & Community Service Awards have honored individual seniors, adults, and youth, as well as community and faith-based groups, small businesses, and corporations that serve their communities in extraordinary ways without expectation of reward, recognition, or compensation. These Virginians exemplify the spirit of service, foster the virtues and skills of civic engagement and social responsibility, demonstrate sustained commitment to meeting community needs, and utilize unique and creative approaches to meeting those needs.

2024 Governor's Volunteerism & Community Service Award Honorees

Outstanding Youth Volunteer
Ashley Coulson

Outstanding Young Adult Volunteer
Bezawit Getachew Mulatu

Outstanding Adult Volunteer
Alisa Thornton

Outstanding Senior Volunteer
Mary Lee Di Spirito

Outstanding Independent Group
Michelle Smeltzer & Nichole Johns

Outstanding Community Organization
**Youth Education Program of the
Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia**

Outstanding Educational Organization
ODU Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Outstanding Faith-Based Organization
The Chapel

Outstanding Small Business
Notes n' Beats Music School

Outstanding Corporation
Newport News Shipbuilding

Ashley Coulson

Outstanding Youth Volunteer



As a recent high school graduate, Ashley Coulson has been a dedicated volunteer in Y Street, the Virginia Foundation for Healthy Youth's youth-led statewide initiative, where she served 115 service hours in the past year. She helped lead the program's Share the Air campaign, working towards tobacco-free and e-cigarette-free parks, playgrounds, beaches, and trails across the Commonwealth. Her service included organizing booths at community events, gauging Virginians' attitudes toward tobacco-free outdoor policies, and meeting with elected officials and community leaders. Ashley also served on the Y Street Leadership Team for three consecutive terms and held a one-year term as Secretary on the Y Street Executive Board.

Having grown up in a family of six, her dedication is fueled by her love for her family, friends, and the community she now calls home. When Ashley moved to Woodstock, Virginia, she faced the unease that often comes with change. Instead of letting this hold her back, Ashley dove in. Through her participation in Y Street, Ashley experienced a significant expansion of her comfort zone, improving her advocacy, leadership, and public speaking skills while evolving into a more resilient version of herself.

In addition, Ashley was also active in school, including more than a decade of Dance, Drama Club, and the student-led acapella group, among other activities. She also served on Student Council as social media coordinator and helped organize events including Homecoming, blood drives, fundraisers for charities, and Spirit Week. In all of her service, Ashley has demonstrated commitment, perseverance, grace, and tenacity.

Bezawit Getachew Mulatu

Outstanding Young Adult Volunteer



Bezawit Mulatu is a University of Richmond (UR) pre-med and pre-law student dedicated to improving lives and fostering inclusivity. She serves as a first responder with UR Emergency Medical Services and the Tuckahoe Volunteer Rescue Squad, as well as a volunteer clinician at CrossOver Health Ministry and with the Virginia Medical Reserve Corps. She strives to be conversational in multiple languages, including American Sign Language, and is learning Braille to ensure inclusive communication in her future roles. She also enjoys making balloon animals from surgical gloves and performing magic tricks to entertain pediatric patients.

Bezawit conducts research on ways to challenge the gap between legal promises and the everyday realities faced by patients who are blind or have low vision under the National Federation of the Blind, aiming to drive improvements in accessibility. Her skills in braille and sculpting enable her to create tactile 3D versions of medical reports, X-rays, ultrasound images, and other diagnostic scans while ensuring HIPAA compliance to protect patient privacy. She also designs interactive prototypes with assistive technologies for libraries to enhance navigation and learning for blind students. By integrating law, science, art, and advocacy, she hopes to promote equity in access to essential services.

At UR, Bezawit's leadership has earned her a full scholarship as a Richmond Scholar and an Oliver Hill Scholar, the Engage for Change Service Award, and the Black Excellence Gala Trailblazer Award. She was also named the 2024 Newman Civic Fellow by Campus Compact and recognized as a Global School Advocate by the United Nations SDSN.



Alisa Thornton

Outstanding Adult Volunteer

Alisa Thornton is currently the Chair of the Virginia Department of Social Services' Parent Advisory Council and owner of Another Touch Solutions. She is a kinship provider, parent advocate, and realtor. Alisa is also a former Family Support Partner and Peer Recovery Specialist with the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), where she was the 2023 recipient of the NAMI Virginia Hope Award. Through her service, she has helped hundreds of families navigate available services and resources, getting them the help they need. She is also currently certified as a trainer to conduct support groups and parent training for various organizations within the state and nationally. Her work has helped empower individuals with disabilities and mental health challenges to find their voice and place in society. Alisa's passion for mental health comes from seeing multiple family members and friends go untreated for years with no help or support.

As a domestic violence survivor, Alisa is also a well-known speaker sharing her experiences to offer hope and strength to families facing violence, mental health issues, and homelessness. She also spoke at a Congressional Caucus on Homelessness briefing.

Further, Alisa is the Vice President of the Oxon Hill Shining Stars Lions Club. She also supports organizations such as Generations United, Casey Family Programs, Foundations First, Formed Families Forward, Stars Performing Arts, and Tavares Charities. Alisa takes pride working with the Prince William County CIT team that trains law enforcement to work with people in crisis by sharing her story. She has also worked hard advocating for the needs of the Crisis Receiving Center in Prince William County with VOICE.



Mary Lee Di Spirito

Outstanding Senior Volunteer

Mary Lee Di Spirito coordinates the Annandale Christian Community for Action (ACCA) furniture program, which she managed for decades with her husband, Don, who passed away earlier this year. She has volunteered with ACCA for more than thirty years, generously giving time and talents to the Annandale community, impacting countless local families.

As part of her ACCA service, Mary Lee spearheaded the expansion of ACCA's ministry to include furniture distribution and has worked for more than 25 years to help provide residents with safe and comfortable furnishings. Since then, ACCA's furniture ministry has provided essential furniture and household items to more than 24,000 individuals through more than 12,000 deliveries.

Mary Lee also volunteered with Meals on Wheels and at Bailey's Shelter & Supportive Housing, a multi-service facility that offers an emergency shelter program and permanent supportive housing. Though the new shelter originally faced community opposition, she and her husband testified before the Planning Commission and served on the shelter's advisory committee, helping the new shelter gain public support.

Throughout her life, Mary Lee has done much more than provide thousands of hours of direct service to individuals in her community. She has forged relationships, created opportunities for others to participate in community service, and engaged in critical advocacy work, writing letters, attending and testifying at public meetings, and serving on boards to support her community.



Michelle Smeltzer & Nichole Johns

Outstanding Independent Group

Michelle Smeltzer and Nichole Johns serve the community of Warren County, Virginia, through a variety of volunteer organizations. They are committed to working for the betterment of the community, volunteering together at community organizations such as the Warren Coalition, Concern Hotline, Dinner Together, House of Hope, and Reaching Out Now. Together, Michelle and Nichole amassed close to 1,000 hours of community service in the past year.

They also serve on the Board of Directors for Hope and Rest Temporary Shelter (HARTS), which Michelle help create when she saw the need and then worked to coalesce a community group to provide shelter through twelve local churches. Michelle and Nichole work tirelessly to ensure homeless residents have a safe and warm space to spend winter nights, raising funds, driving a van to take unhoused residents to the shelter, scheduling meals and personnel, doing laundry, and keeping the peace. Between 30 and 40 people are served nightly by the shelter, December through April. Since its inception in 2018, HARTS has served more than 250 Warren County residents.

Through their work with local churches, Michelle and Nichole have been able to keep HARTS open during the winter months, even through the pandemic. Additionally, the pair volunteers relentlessly throughout the community and continue to advocate for the most vulnerable residents.



Youth Education Program of the Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia

*Outstanding Community
Organization*

The Youth Education Program (YEP) is a Master Gardeners of Northern Virginia team of certified Extension Master Gardeners that provides hands-on youth gardening education at local schools and youth organizations. With a focus on sustainable practices, YEP's 10-15 members collectively worked approximately 1,400 hours in the past year and served nearly 20 different youth organizations, including elementary schools in Alexandria and Arlington, the local Boys and Girls Club of Greater Washington, and the Northern Virginia Juvenile Detention Center.

YEP members empower kids, caregivers, and teachers to practice sustainable gardening through fun activities related to researching, planning, and growing their own gardens. Working in small groups, YEP members engage students in key garden tasks, encouraging them to record observations, data, and drawings in their personal garden journal. YEP kids meet new friends, learn new skills, and engage collaboratively in groups, helping each other pull weeds, test soil, dig holes, and plant seeds.

YEP kids benefit from growing food and native plants, belonging to a garden community, experiencing the mental health boosts of gardening, and learning about healthy eating. Further, as an intergenerational program, YEP members also benefit. YEP members advocate for school garden space and outdoor water access by serving on local sustainability boards and communities are created through YEP's work. Caring for and nurturing a garden enhances feelings of empowerment and community for all.

ODU Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship

Outstanding Educational Organization



The Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Old Dominion University (ODU) is an entrepreneurial accelerator dedicated to providing economic development to veterans and underserved or disadvantaged individuals. Through its collective programs in the past year, the Institute provided 4,055 thirty-minute counseling sessions, created 498 new entrepreneurs, established 54 startup businesses, enabled 76 contracts totaling \$13 million, and created 498 new jobs.

Despite a significant military footprint, Hampton Roads experiences significant challenges in social mobility and financial wellbeing. The Institute recognizes this and works to create grant strategies to assist these populations. These strategies include the Veterans Business Outreach Center and the Women's Business Center as well as additional work to ensure that entrepreneurs are properly credentialed and positioned to compete for the abundant federal contracts in the region.

The majority of the Institute staff is minority and or former military and a gold-star wife is a program leader. Located in downtown Norfolk, the Institute provides underserved individuals with opportunity, education, training, respect, and sometimes just a hot coffee on a cold day. Though not everyone becomes a successful entrepreneur, the Institute works to direct clients to the resources they need to improve their lives.



The Chapel

Outstanding Faith-Based Organization

The Chapel has physical locations throughout the greater Richmond area and a life-giving online community, including Spanish-language worship services. The Chapel serves the community in a variety of ways, including monthly outreach to the homeless, live-streaming worship services behind bars for those incarcerated at Chesterfield County Jail, including ongoing mentoring and live baptisms inside their walls, as well as livestreaming into 42 state prisons in the Virginia Department of Corrections. They also have many partnerships with local outreach organizations as well as around the world.

The Chapel offers practical and enjoyable ways to discover life-changing community. Meaningful relationships aren't always easy to find but The Chapel hopes to help every person to live out their calling by using their gifts and talents to serve others in the church and the community. The Chapel also hosts an annual student conference that engages hundreds of high students each year, who are taught to take their faith and put it into motion. Students are also invited to attend weekend worship services and then gather for worship, creative teaching, and small groups during the week at their location.

The Chapel is a place where those who have been left behind or forgotten about have a place where they can be loved. The Chapel supports men and women while incarcerated, championing them to take the right steps to get their life back together, to get on the right track, and to have the right focus.



Notes n' Beats Music School

Outstanding Small Business

Notes n' Beats Music School is an Ashburn-based music school that teaches instruments and voice in Western and Indian styles of music. The owner, staff, students, and parents of Notes n' Beats Music School are committed to making a difference in the community by spreading the joy of music through small pop-up shows and raising funds with large-scale benefit events. They organized and performed in more than 15 pop-up shows in just a few months and raised more than \$135,000 for various organizations over the last seven years.

Veena Pandiri, the school's owner, organized their first show in order to share her experience as a cancer survivor. This evolved into an annual benefit event in order to raise funds for charities. Each year, more than 50 students participate in backstage operations, marketing, sales, and onstage management, while many others perform. Driven by the mission to serve through music, the school also offers music classes to those without access to music education and performs at shelters, senior centers, fairs, and other community events. Collectively, Notes n' Beats members volunteered more than 8,500 hours over the past four years.

Further, the Notes n' Beats Music School has supported student projects to collect and donate musical instruments to underprivileged schools. These initiatives demonstrate the impact of the school's commitment to using music as a force for good, motivating young people to give back.

Newport News Shipbuilding

Outstanding Corporation



Located in Newport News, Newport News Shipbuilding (NNS), a division of HII, is a major employer in Hampton Roads with more than 26,000 shipbuilders. NNS gives back to the community by preparing underserved students for college and the workforce as part of a strategic effort to meet its critical hiring needs and strengthen the local economy.

Through initiatives like STEM mentoring, career awareness programs, teacher internships, and experiential learning, NNS helps students build the foundational skills needed for careers in the maritime industry. These programs introduce students to the opportunities available and help them envision themselves as productive members of the community.

With a focus on underserved populations, NNS addresses educational disparities, ensuring that more students have the tools to succeed. NNS also supports students academically through tutoring initiatives to support the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs), ensuring they are equipped with the skills needed for higher education. These initiatives create a clear pathway to college, apprenticeships, and jobs, opening doors to sustainable careers and lifelong community engagement.

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