

2001 Virginia McKnight Binger Awards in
Human Service

RECIPIENTS

Susan Baxter

George Failes

Bertha Givins

Maria Inés Hitateguy

Barb King

Marge Melich

Kristine Reiter

Muriel Simmons

V.J. Smith

Sang Vu



PROGRAM

Earle Brown Heritage Center
Brooklyn Center, Minnesota

November 16, 2001
2:30 p.m.

WELCOME

Rip Rapson

PRESIDENT
THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Lyle Iron Moccasin

CHAIR
VIRGINIA MCKNIGHT BINGER
AWARDS IN HUMAN SERVICE COMMITTEE

PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

Erika L. Binger

DIRECTOR
THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Rip Rapson

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Jaime Longoria, Minneapolis
Lyle Iron Moccasin, Minneapolis
Deborah Montgomery, St. Paul
Sheldon Olkon, St. Paul
Pat Schwartz, Belle Plaine
Somly Sitthisay, Oakdale



In the Year of Volunteers

Virginia M. Binger, Honorary Chair, The McKnight Foundation

Four years ago, the United Nations proclaimed 2001 the International Year of Volunteers. The UN noted, first, that “volunteering makes an important economic contribution to society” and, second and more important, that “volunteering helps in the building of strong and cohesive communities. It fosters trust among citizens and helps develop norms of solidarity and reciprocity, which are essential to stable communities.”



Of course, no one foresaw how very much volunteers would matter this year. Now, when we think of volunteers, it is impossible not to think of the thousands who risked and even gave their lives to help the victims of terrorism in Washington, D.C., and New York City. Volunteers poured into the cities to help with the rescue and clean-up. They donated goods, dollars, and blood, and opened their homes to offer food and shelter. In such terrible times, those driven by a sense of solidarity with the sufferers do not consider it a sacrifice to volunteer. They see it as the only thing to do.

The magnitude of a disaster makes volunteers highly visible. But in many people the impulse to serve is always there. It manifests itself mostly in quiet deeds, from spending a few hours to mentor a child to helping immigrants feel at home in a strange place, from organizing a food shelf to empowering women who are trying to leave welfare. Volunteers, by their example, affirm that we're all in this life together and that, by sharing our strengths, we can build a better life for everyone. As each gives something according to his or her ability, reciprocity and solidarity merge into a sense of community.

In this, the 17th year of the McKnight Awards in Human Service, we are proud to honor 10 people who exemplify the promise of the International Year of Volunteers. They have made their neighborhoods and communities stronger and more cohesive. While some of us may have recognized only recently how vulnerable we are as individuals and a society, and how much we depend upon others, these recipients always have lived with the knowledge of human frailty and, in turn, have faithfully offered kindness and support. They are heroes of everyday life, and it is a privilege to thank them today.



Susan Baxter

FRIDLEY

Each week 80 children attend Camp Heartland near Willow River. They learn, play games, experience the outdoors, and build self-esteem. The best thing is that nobody feels different or ostracized, because everybody has something in common: The children, most from low-income families, have HIV/AIDS. Nobody has to pay for the magical days at camp, because volunteers like Sue Baxter raise money to send them there. Sue works 20 hours a week—on top of a full-time corporate job at the Roseville Target store—as a volunteer for Camp Heartland, convincing individuals, organizations, and corporations to support it.

Sue also delivers Meals on Wheels in Roseville and volunteers with seniors at Roseville Good Samaritan Home. When the nursing home needed painting, she rallied 45 Target colleagues to get it done. When the Toys for Tots program started, Sue enlisted her store first and then got 50 more involved. Last year those stores collected 600,000 toys.

Finding time isn't a problem, Sue says: "It's how you prioritize what you want to do and what kind of difference you want to make."



"Sue's boundless energy and compassionate nature demand that she channel her time and efforts doing something special for someone."

—Monica Proulx



George Failes

ST. PAUL

*A*n inherited condition gradually stole George Failes's eyesight. Yet he has not only maintained his own independence but has helped other vision-impaired people do the same. An 18-year volunteer peer counselor with the Vision Loss Resource Center, George is proof that despite the loss of sight, one can stay fully engaged with the world.

A former agronomist at what is now Cenex-Harvest States, George used adaptive technology to keep working until he became legally blind. His experience and education enabled him to be an articulate advocate for blind people as technology became feasible to improve their lives. He is especially proud of helping launch Minnesota's Dial-In News program, which delivers daily news over the phone, and serving as an advisory member for Radio Talking Book. He recently helped establish a major public-private partnership that will teach older people with poor vision to use adaptive software to "read" their mail, manage their finances, and communicate via email. He's now working to establish training sites. "I get a lot of satisfaction in being able to initiate concepts and carry them through," he says. "I get the help of many other people to get the job done."

"He has been a wonderful role model and spokesperson on how technology can help the visually impaired."

—Peter Wyckoff



Bertha Givins

ST. PAUL

People who need a sofa, a bed, or a chair to make a meager home livable know Bertha Givins is the person to call. A retired lab assistant, Bertha volunteers nearly full-time as a furniture voucher advocate at Catholic Charities in St. Paul's Frogtown. Her clients' material needs aren't her only concern. "I try to help them, but we don't want to be a crutch for them," she says. "I encourage them to better their lives and situations." She also helps with Catholic Charities' adopt-a-family holiday program and mentors Bethel College students who volunteer, instilling a commitment to service and teaching them about the Frogtown community's rich diversity.

Her work doesn't stop at the office door. She visits schools to talk about peace and different cultures. She speaks out against racism. She advocates for the homeless and near homeless. She's active in a neighborhood initiative to help youth, the faith community, and the police get acquainted. "Bringing people together helps to keep peace," she says. "We can all live together and be friends."

"She has the ability to see people for their assets, talents, and resources rather than their needs and deficiencies."

—Teresa Glass





Maria Inés Hitateguy

ST. PAUL

When she emigrated from Uruguay 20 years ago, Maria Inés Hitateguy didn't speak English and knew no one except her employer, whose children she cared for. Now she has a master's degree in international business and is pursuing a second master's degree. She works full-time supervising interpreter services for Allina Health System, but she is always available to help members of the Latino community near St. Paul's West Seventh Street. Whether someone needs to make an appointment, visit a doctor, or sign up for English classes, Maria Inés is there. She believes so passionately in education that she has inspired countless others to improve their skills and serve their community.

Maria Inés has mentored families, built bridges with people of other races through joint efforts such as housing, and helped Latino children obtain scholarships for private schools. Now she is working on her dream. She founded weekly classes through St. James Catholic Church to help Latino women gain self-esteem and start their own small businesses. Nine women are currently enrolled. "I was helped when I went through hard times," she says. "I'm so blessed with opportunities that I want to do something for others."



"She has worked to develop leaders within the community by establishing relationships, calling forth gifts and talents, and accompanying them as they take on individual commitments."

—Anne Attea

Barb King

MINNEAPOLIS

People behave better when their surroundings are nicer, Barb King says. So she fills planters around the Bloomington-Lake neighborhood with flowers. She enlists businesses, city officials, and others to help keep the flowers watered and weeded. She spreads beauty around, giving bouquets to people who are shut in or having a bad day. Sometimes, though, she returns to find plants uprooted and drug paraphernalia hidden in the dirt. She is always vigilant, carries a camera, and stays in touch with the police. When confronted, she won't back down.

A persistent, persuasive force for neighborhood improvement, Barb has convinced businesses and community groups to improve lighting, pick up garbage, and take note of suspicious activity. She also assists individuals directly, helping disabled people get ramps for their homes, for example, and providing mittens and Halloween treats for kids in need. A retired nurse, Barb says she likes her neighborhood and won't give up on it. You can come out the door each day and be discouraged, she says, or you can do something about it. Her choice is unequivocal. "I just want to help people have a better neighborhood," she says.



"She's been a driving force at cleaning up and ridding crime from the Bloomington-Lake Street area of south Minneapolis, often at great personal risk."

—Thor Carlson





Marge Melich

ST. CLOUD

*A*t age 75, Marge Melich is a senior citizen herself, but she has energy to spare—energy she uses generously to help older and disabled people feel needed and cared for. For years, she has volunteered daily at Whitney Senior Center as a hostess at noon meals, and twice a week at Talahi Care Center in St. Cloud, bringing wheelchair residents to the beauty salon. In addition, she is on call whenever her time and talents are needed. She organizes entertainment for seniors, runs flu and cholesterol clinics, works with the city of St. Cloud to help people in crisis, serves on boards, organizes a local parade, volunteers with arts groups—the list goes on and on.

Marge is a lifelong volunteer, but she picked up the pace about 15 years ago, when a part-time job ended. When her mother entered a nursing home, she decided she wanted to work with older people and began volunteering at Talahi. A brother who died of cancer and another who has Down syndrome helped her understand the needs of disabled people. “If I had these people with me, I’d be spending time with them,” she says. “They’re not here, so I want to find someone else I can help.”

“Marge is the personification and proof of the power to change communities and lives.”

—Ivy Heggstad

Kristine Reiter

SHOREVIEW

*K*ristine Reiter met Hmong children in a St. Paul housing project when her boss, Ramsey County Sheriff Bob Fletcher, ran a Boy Scout program there. Having grown up in a privileged, secure family near Como Park, she says, she was shocked to see how the Hmong children lived. “Their parents didn’t speak English, they had no one to help with their homework, they’d never had a bike,” she says. “I’d take them places and get more out of it than they did. It was so fun to see them having fun.”

Kris has been intensely involved with children at McDonough and Mount Airy housing projects for 10 years now, running the Sheriff’s Youth Literacy Program, an afterschool program that includes sports along with reading. While reading is critical, she says, it is involvement in sports that helps some kids get through school. Her parents and three sisters volunteer with her. Informally, Kris takes kids on outings, attends their games, helps with homework, organizes picnics, and even bought one girl a prom dress. Kris keeps a special watch over three young women, who will be the first girls in their families to graduate, and one of whom is the first Hmong female hockey player in the country.

“She has spent most of her free time and funds making a difference in the lives of children.”

—Deborah Reiter





Muriel Simmons

MINNEAPOLIS

In 1997, Muriel Simmons asked God to find her a house. She had moved to Minnesota from the East Coast a couple of years earlier and was living with her daughter. Soon she found a house in the Phillips neighborhood, unaware of the neighborhood's reputed high crime rate. A son living with her was fighting a drug problem, and he told her he could not overcome drugs in such a place. "Oh, yes, you can," she told him. "The drugs have to go." She began making phone calls, attending meetings, organizing a block club and social events, forming a neighborhood "phone tree" to report suspicious activity, and generally getting the place cleaned up. "It's turned completely around," she says.

Muriel's gentle demeanor belies her determination. She moved to Phillips as a disabled widow with little money, and she has stayed because she feels a mission to bring people together to make the community healthier. She motivates, inspires, and leads others to do more than they ever believed they could. Whether it's reading to children or organizing a breast-cancer screening, she is always looking out for others. Friends and acquaintances call her an angel.

"She has given more to her community in four years than most people do in a lifetime. Muriel's entire life is based on serving others."

—Louis Smith

V.J. Smith

MINNEAPOLIS

“*I*’m a former bad boy,” V.J. Smith says. Abandoned at age 9, he ran away from foster care and got involved with drugs and a gang. It took him a couple of attempts to clean up his life, but eventually he did, inspired by motivational tapes and his newfound faith in himself. Now he works tirelessly to get Twin Cities youths to give up drugs and guns, go to school, get a job, and respect themselves and others. As the founder of MAD DADS, he walks the streets of Minneapolis, along with other parents, talking to neighborhood youths, dispensing hugs, and making referrals to fathering, recovery, GED, and employment programs. Trouble is never far away. He has found himself in the midst of gunfights, endured taunts from drug dealers, and consoled families after a child’s death.

V.J.’s life is full as a husband and father, and resident services coordinator for a development corporation. But he is also dedicated to showing street kids that adults care, that people need to look out for each other, and that good citizenship is rewarding. If his work helps them avoid the problems he himself had to overcome, it is more than worthwhile, he says, adding, “I fulfill some of my dreams by working with these kids.”

“V.J. is a turnaround specialist. He has turned around his life, his community, and youth.”

—Mark-Peter Lundquist





Sang Vu

NEW BRIGHTON

Southeast Asians have lived quietly in Minnesota for 30 years. Sang Vu believes it is time for them to recognize what they have and give something back to their community and to the country from which they came. He has two goals—to encourage Vietnamese young people to become active in community life and to encourage them to learn and appreciate Vietnamese cultural values and traditions. “When young people graduate and get a job, it is time for them to work for their community,” Sang says. “Often they don’t know how to do it. We help put it together. That’s what gives me energy.”

He strives to promote the well-being of the Vietnamese community in Minnesota and to preserve his native cultural heritage. For example, he staged a Vietnamese New Year celebration, which included cultural activities attended by thousands. When he was much younger, Sang volunteered with the Red Cross and YMCA. Later, as an engineer at Guidant Corporation, he founded the Asian-Pacific Professionals Society of Minnesota, through which he has mentored young professionals, encouraged networking across races, and educated members about southeast Asia’s conditions and needs, especially in Vietnam. He has personally given time and money to Vietnamese orphanages, flood relief, housing, and students in need of scholarships. His curriculum is to teach by example.

“Many young Vietnamese professionals have begun to emulate his example, to volunteer their time and talent.”

—Oanh Pham



Previous Recipients

Virginia McKnight Binger Awards in Human Service

2000

Jean Andrews
Melvin Carter, Jr.
Sylvia Carty
Richard Endres
John and Julie Funari
Hazel Jacobson
Raleigh Kent
George Nelsen
Delroy Schoenleben
Manuel Zuniga

1999

Henry Bruns
Ernesto DelVillar, Sr.
Marcelle Diedrich
Denise Gubrud and
Margarita Reese
Darlene Edwards
Phoenix Hill
Geraldine Hull
Ardis Knutson
Yako Myers
Joyce Segelbaum

1998

Christine Barich
Dawn Glaser-Falk
Joe Huber
Michael Kirk
Kevin L. Perez
Rodriguez
Edwin Reich
Scott Schlaffman
Choua "Mindy" Thao
Georgeanna Toftum
Clorasteen Wilson

1997

Marjory Aldrich
Jim Christy
Dianne Kimm
Allan Law
Sue Liedl
Larry Cloud Morgan
William Radueg
RaeAnn Ruth
Frankie and Velma
Tyson
Peggy Wells

1996

Vivian Blount
Cynthia Hawkins
Gregory Horan
Dale Hulme
Joe LaGarde
Percy and Lillian
Olson
Joan Peterson
Jody Porter
Dave Ronning
Georgia Theis

1995

Laurice Beaudry
Dianne Binns
Leonard Gloeb
Fran Heitzman
Algjuan Hixon
Bruce Lubitz
Mary Robillard
Bill Rowe
Pat Schwartz
Jamie Slattery

1994

John Bobolink
Lori Ellis Boswell
Bill Driscoll
Janet Gostanczik
Shirley Ellen Jensen
Art Johnson
James Francis Kelly
Katherine G. King
Forrest R. Osterholm
Fred Rupp

1993

Eileen Bohn
Francisco Caballero
Sandra Gessler
Frank R. Johnson
David Lund
Don Mooney
Tyrone Smith
Art Stoeberl
Sheila WhiteEagle
Eleanore Whitmyre

1992

Peggy Holmes
Bellocourt
Dorothy Bilheimer
Jane Blattner
Eugene Chelberg
Dr. Kenneth and
Grace Covey
Dorothy Haynes
Norma Schleppegrell
Roger and Donna
Urbanski
Quang Vu
Glen Wilfong

1991

Cynthia Ann Barry
Shirley Benitez
Julia Dinsmore
Dan Edgar
Terry Ford
Alice McHie
Kouthong Vixayvong
Walter White
Marie Wing
Mary Stier Winkels