

passionate caring
generous inspiring
welcoming
kind volunteer
tireless community
compassionate
supportive service



 *New River Valley
Leading Lights*

Celebrating Neighbors Helping Neighbors
Recognition Ceremony
April 30, 2026



mentor loving
leader driven
vital enthusiastic
supportive
go-to devoted
joyful



About New River Valley Leading Lights

Since 2009, New River Valley Leading Lights has acknowledged and honored volunteers across the NRV who are making community-changing impacts, culminating in an annual celebratory banquet.

NRV Leading Lights was formed following the events of April 16, 2007, at Virginia Tech. During this time, our community witnessed an incredible outpouring of support from community members who performed extraordinary acts of service in response to the tragedy.

Seeing the importance of volunteers during this time inspired the German Club Alumni Foundation and other community leaders. They created NRV Leading Lights in an effort to recognize the incredible contribution volunteers make to our community every day.

**In this spirit of volunteerism,
we celebrate this evening.**

**We dedicate this night to all those
impacted by April 16, 2007.**



Tonight's Program



Welcome & Introductions

Ann Cassell

NRV Leading Lights Board President

Keynote Speaker

Angie Covey

Director for Development - VCOM-Virginia Campus

2026 Leading Lights Recognition

Distinguished Recipients

Robert "Bob" Job High School Award • High School Award

College Award

Community Awards:

Floyd • Giles • Montgomery • Pulaski • Radford

Blacksburg Breakfast Lions Club Award (Montgomery)

Jim and Lenna Moore Memorial Award (Montgomery)

German Club Alumni Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award

Closing Remarks

A Note from the Board

We owe a debt of gratitude to each of the outstanding volunteers nominated tonight and to all their nominators. Thank you also to each of our organizations for granting us leave to serve with NRV Leading Lights.

This program includes a short summary of each nominee that will give you a glimpse into each person's contributions to our community. We hope their stories inspire all of us to get more engaged in service.

Board of Directors

Ann Cassell, President
Montgomery County

Holly McFall
Montgomery County

Janiele Hamden
City of Radford

Jill Ross
Pulaski County

Kelly Kaiser
New River Community College

Terrie Sternberg
Pulaski County

Rev. Bill King, Past President
Montgomery County

Amy Webb
Pulaski County

Meghan Kuhn, Secretary
Virginia Tech

Amanda Winter
City of Radford

Ryan Martin, Treasurer
YMCA at Virginia Tech

Award Selection Committee

Bill King

Terrie Sternberg

Amanda Winter



2026 *Leading Lights*



High School

Emily Hall
 Geri-len Johnson
 Abigale McClure
 Rishi Nair
 Ian Yu

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College

Cole Howard
 Abby Touchstone

* * *

Lifetime Achievement

Earl Brown
 Jonathan Evans
 James (Jim) Lawrence

* * *

Community Members

Diane Akers
 Shirley Akers
 Maggie Bassett
 Lynn Brammer
 Pamela Edwards
 Linda Ewing
 Spencer Ferrell
 Nikki Garland
 Charlie Herbert
 Trish Knighton
 Anne Larsen
 Krista Lindsey
 Tim Mallard
 Ken Presser
 Tom and Debbie Schaefer
 Christina Shelor
 Melanie Smith
 Dusty Spence
 Clara Taylor
 Natalie Thomas
 Jamie Thompson
 Barbara Vesely
 Andrew Walker
 Jean Woods

* * *



Our Impact



We are honored to recognize 34 Leading Lights this year. Tonight, 11 distinguished recipient awards will be honored: two High School, two College, along with Community Members for residents in the city of Radford, the counties of Floyd, Giles, Pulaski, and Montgomery, and a Lifetime Achievement recipient.

Each distinguished recipient will receive \$500 to donate to a New River Valley nonprofit of their choosing. The Lifetime Achievement recipient will receive \$1,000.

A Special Thank You

The Community Foundation
German Club Alumni Foundation
KymnImages Photography
HazelBea Catering
New River Engraving



Stay Involved with Us



Nominate a volunteer for the next awards!

Do you know an outstanding volunteer and resident of the NRV who meets the below criteria? *Submit a nomination at leadinglightsnrv.org!*

- Devotes a significant, ongoing amount of time to volunteerism
- Addresses community needs and is making an impact
- Demonstrates leadership and/or shows initiative

Join our Board or become a Community Advisor.

NRV Leading Lights is always looking for new board members. Members serve three-year terms, attend monthly meetings (Sept. - May), and participate on one or more teams (such as fundraising or banquet planning). Advisors have a less formal commitment, lending their expertise to specific projects or teams.

Donate or become a sponsor.

Every donation or sponsorship supports our banquet and awards, and, in turn, our community. *Donations may be made payable to:*

NRV Leading Lights
P.O. Box 236
Blacksburg, VA 24063

Donations can also be made online at leadinglightsnrv.org/donations.

Please support NRV Leading Lights during the upcoming GiveLocal NRV Giving Day! Early giving opens on June 1, and Giving Day starts at noon on June 25.

We are grateful for your support. These events would not be possible without the many generous donors across the New River Valley over the years. Every gift matters in helping to recognize outstanding volunteers across the NRV!

Interested in becoming more involved with us?

Contact us at leadinglightsnrv@gmail.com.



Keynote Speaker



Angie Covey

*Director for Development
VCOM-Virginia Campus*



Angie Covey is a lifelong resident of Pulaski County and a proud first-generation college student who worked full time while attending New River Community College (NRCC) and Virginia Tech (VT). Her passion for learning earned her associate, bachelor's, and master's degrees. While she is proud of her degrees from Virginia Tech, her time at NRCC is most meaningful. The structure and support for students from challenging backgrounds had a lasting impact on her career path. She returned to NRCC after VT and began a 32-year career.

At NRCC, she served in multiple positions including coordinator of workforce training, associate vice president for workforce development, associate vice president of the foundation, and executive director of the NRCC Educational Foundation (NRCCEF), a role she held until retiring in July 2025.

Each position brought increasing responsibility and expanded her community involvement, including Pulaski County Public Schools Education Foundation, LewisGale Pulaski Hospital Board of Trustees, Pulaski County Chamber of Commerce (past president), Pulaski County Rotary (past president), the New River Valley Regional Commission Executive Committee, Montgomery County Economic Development Commission, and others.

As executive director of NRCCEF, she found her greatest passion in building financial pathways through tuition assistance and scholarships. She helped lead the creation of NRCC's Access to Community College Education (ACCE) program, recognized as one of the most impactful advancement initiatives in the Virginia Community College System. She also helped reintroduce NRCC to the New River Valley, highlighting its impact and strengthening community awareness. During her tenure, foundation assets grew to more than \$35 million, all dedicated to student success.

Her retirement was short-lived. Her hospital board experience and care for aging parents increased her awareness of the physician shortage in rural communities. That led her to Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine (VCOM), whose mission to train community-focused physicians aligned with her calling. She now serves as director of development. She continues to focus on strengthening partnerships, expanding philanthropic support, and advancing VCOM's mission to improve access to healthcare in underserved communities across the region. Her work reflects a lifelong commitment to education, workforce development, and rural community wellbeing initiatives.



High School Leading Lights



Emily Hall, Radford High School

Emily Hall's volunteer service reflects an outstanding commitment to leadership, agriculture, and community engagement across the New River Valley. As president of Radford Future Farmers of America and a leader within the Pulaski County 4-H Livestock Club, she has developed strong leadership skills while actively supporting youth programs. She also serves as the student representative for the Radford High School CTE board, helping connect students to career and technical education opportunities. In addition to her leadership roles, Emily is a dedicated volunteer with the Fine Arts Center for the New River Valley. Over the past three years, she has supported numerous events, assisting visitors, managing refreshments, and helping with the setup and display of artwork. She also contributes at outdoor events by working with children's art activities and welcoming guests. Known for her positive attitude and reliability, Emily consistently steps in wherever needed. Her service has been recognized by volunteers and staff, and she continues to inspire others to get involved in their community.

Note: Emily Hall received multiple nominations this year.

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Geri-len Johnson, Floyd County High School

Geri-Len Johnson's volunteer service with Plenty! Farm & Food Bank has made a meaningful impact on the Floyd County community. For over a year, she has been a dedicated member of the Thursday Pantry team, helping stock shelves, sort donations, and distribute food to individuals and families in need. Known for her kindness and strong work ethic, Geri-Len approaches every task with compassion, whether assisting with groceries, supporting clients during check-in, or helping at special events. Her warm, welcoming presence creates an environment where community members feel respected and supported during difficult times. She has built strong relationships with fellow volunteers, staff, and clients, helping foster a sense of connection and trust. Geri-Len's positive attitude and consistent dedication have inspired others to volunteer, showing that even small acts of service can make a big difference. Through her efforts, she helps address food insecurity while strengthening a sense of community.

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High School Leading Lights



Abigale McClure, Radford High School

Abigale McClure has dedicated two years of volunteer service to the Radford Recreation Department as a junior cheer coach, making a meaningful impact on young athletes in her community. She teaches cheer, leads the squad during games, and supports her team with patience, encouragement, and enthusiasm. During her senior year, Abby stepped up when the junior squad was at risk of not having a coach. Although she had planned to focus on other activities, she chose to volunteer her time to ensure the team could continue. She spent her Saturdays supporting fourth- and fifth-grade cheerleaders, prioritizing their experience. Through her leadership, Abby helped build confidence in young participants, especially those who were initially shy or hesitant. She emphasized teamwork, encouragement, and the importance of supporting one another. Her selflessness and commitment ensured that these girls had the opportunity to participate, grow, and feel a sense of belonging, making a lasting impact in the Radford community.

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Rishi Nair, Blacksburg High School

Rishi Nair's volunteer leadership at the Blacksburg Library reflects a strong commitment to education, mentorship, and community building. As the founder of the library chess club, which he has led from 2021 to 2026, Rishi has created a weekly space where up to 20 K–12 students gather to learn and play chess. With more than 400 volunteer hours, he has taught strategy while emphasizing critical thinking, patience, sportsmanship, and confidence. His calm, encouraging approach helps students of all skill levels feel supported and engaged. Beyond instruction, Rishi built lasting impact through consistent leadership and outreach. He founded the Blacksburg High School Chess Club, captained the school's Quiz Bowl team, and created a website to extend learning beyond weekly meetings. His efforts have strengthened community connection at the library and inspired additional chess programs in local schools. Parents and librarians note his positive influence on students' focus, confidence, and collaboration skills. Through steady leadership and inclusive teaching, Rishi has helped to build culture of learning and engagement in the New River Valley.

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High School Leading Lights



Ian Yu, Blacksburg High School

Ian Yu is a high school student volunteer with the YMCA at Virginia Tech and the lead instructor for the EnginEquity robotics program. Through this role, he brings together elementary and middle school students from diverse backgrounds to explore coding and robotics in an accessible, hands-on way. Ian designed and led multi-week courses where students build and program Arduino-controlled robot cars. Since Fall 2024, he has contributed more than 100 volunteer hours across four course cycles held in spring, summer, and fall sessions, all offered free of charge to families. He independently developed the curriculum, partnered with local organizations to secure supplies and volunteers, and 3D prints custom components for student kits. Ian also helps train volunteers so they can confidently support instruction and student learning. His work has expanded access to STEM education in the New River Valley, reaching students who face financial and availability barriers. In Spring 2025, EnginEquity served 25 students, and the program continues to grow under his leadership.

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College Leading Lights



Cole Howard, New River Community College

Cole Howard's volunteer service with Plenty! Farm & Food Bank is defined by reliability, initiative, and a strong commitment to improving operations behind the scenes. For the past two years, he has consistently stepped in wherever needed, taking on responsibilities such as managing inventory, troubleshooting equipment issues, and supporting food distribution efforts. His problem-solving mindset and attention to detail have helped streamline processes, reduce waste, and ensure resources are used effectively to serve families across the New River Valley. Cole is known for identifying needs before they are expressed and taking proactive steps to address them, often working independently with confidence and care. He also supports fellow volunteers by offering guidance and helping create an efficient, team-oriented environment. His steady presence and thoughtful approach inspire others to take initiative. Through his service, Cole plays a vital role in strengthening Plenty!'s ability to serve the community with dignity and effectiveness.

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Abby Touchstone, Virginia Tech

Abby Touchstone has volunteered with the YMCA at Virginia Tech for four years, dedicating significant time to student leadership and community service. She leads the YMCA Team of Sustainable Students (Y-TOSS), overseeing large-scale donation collection during Virginia Tech's spring move-out and helping divert over 17 tons of usable items from landfills. She also leads the fall Y-TOSS sale that provides affordable goods to incoming students and organizes thrift pop-ups and trail cleanups throughout the year. In addition, Abby coordinates volunteers across multiple campus sites, develops outreach campaigns, and ensures efficient sorting, distribution, and training processes. As president of YMCA Student Programs, she oversees eight student-led initiatives, supporting budgeting, logistics, and communication across programs. Abby has helped rebuild student programming, expand volunteer engagement, and improve operations to help strengthen the YMCA's ability to serve the New River Valley community.

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Community Leading Lights



Diane Akers, Montgomery County

Diane Akers has dedicated years of sustained volunteer leadership across the New River Valley, applying her professional experience to strengthen multiple community organizations. She serves as vice chair of the New River Community College Educational Foundation Board and contributes to its finance committee, helping guide scholarship support for local students. Diane has served for more than a decade on the Carilion NRV Medical Center Board, including roles as vice chair and most recently chair through 2025, providing steady leadership in regional healthcare. She is also a board member of the Montgomery Museum of Art & History, supporting community engagement and cultural programming. In addition, Diane serves on the NRV Passenger Rail Committee, which she founded in 2013, continuing her work in regional transportation advocacy. She also volunteers with the Montgomery County Christmas Store, assisting in the food department. Across all roles, Diane is known for her collaborative leadership and consistent service.

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Shirley Akers, Montgomery County

Shirley Akers is a dedicated community leader whose volunteer service across Montgomery County reflects a strong focus on equity, education, and civic engagement. She is an original and current board member of The Community Group, supporting efforts to uplift the African American community through advocacy and outreach. Shirley also serves with Dialogue on Race, where she participates in annual summits and helps foster conversations centered on understanding and inclusion. In addition, she is a board member of the NAACP Montgomery, Radford & Floyd Branch, contributing to initiatives focused on voting rights, educational access, and local history. Her service includes support for Race for ACCE fundraising efforts and leadership roles with old Hill School, where she serves as board member and secretary. She is also active in church leadership at Greater Mt. Zion United Holy Church. Across all roles, Shirley leads with purpose and a strong sense of service.

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Community Leading Lights



Maggie Bassett, Montgomery County

Maggie Bassett has dedicated her career and volunteer service to improving health and wellness in the New River Valley through her work with the New River Medical Reserve Corps and the Head Start Health Services Advisory Committee. A registered nurse and emeritus professor at Radford University, she brings both expertise and compassion to every role. Maggie was a cofounder of the NRV Community Health Center in 1979, where she often provided care late into the night to ensure patients received needed services. For the past 15 years, she has served with the Medical Reserve Corps, supporting vaccine clinics, staffing call centers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and serving as a certified Stop the Bleed instructor. She also trains others in emergency response and vaccine education. Through her teaching and mentorship, Maggie has inspired generations of nursing students to serve their communities. Her steady leadership and dedication continue to strengthen access to care across the region.

* * *

Lynn Brammer, Montgomery County

Lynn Brammer is a lifelong volunteer whose dedication to community service spans numerous organizations across the New River Valley. She actively contributes to groups such as Volunteer Montgomery, the New River Blues Society, Montgomery/Floyd Friends of the Library, and the League of Women Voters, often serving in leadership roles and supporting marketing and outreach efforts. Lynn plays a key role in promoting events and fundraisers, helping organizations expand their reach and connect with the community. Her passion for social justice, diversity, and community well-being is evident in the causes she supports and the time she gives. Known affectionately as “The Button Lady,” Lynn uses creative ways to raise awareness, wearing buttons that highlight various causes. Through her energy, consistency, and enthusiasm, Lynn inspires others to get involved and support local initiatives. Her lifelong commitment to volunteerism has made a lasting and meaningful impact across the New River Valley.

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Community Leading Lights



Pamela Edwards, Pulaski County

Pamela Edwards is known for her “boots on the ground” approach to supporting individuals facing homelessness, mental health challenges, and substance use. While her professional work as a crisis response and outreach coordinator, certified peer recovery specialist, and community recovery advisor includes crisis stabilization, resource navigation, and trauma-informed care, it is her work beyond the job description that truly defines her impact. Pamela regularly checks on “her people” at all hours, offering support, guidance, and compassion whenever it is needed. She responds to emergencies off the clock, assists families facing hardship, mentors individuals in recovery, and helps train future peer recovery specialists. She also supports community outreach efforts and helps build programs that address critical gaps in care. Pamela’s service is driven by lived experience and deep empathy. Pamela’s work is not measured in hours but in lives supported, crises eased, and hope restored across her community.

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Linda Ewing, Floyd County

Linda Ewing has been a dedicated volunteer with Plenty! Farm & Food Bank for over eight years, serving in the Food Lion Food Rescue program. In this role, she regularly picks up surplus food from local grocery stores and delivers it for distribution to individuals and families in need throughout Floyd County. Her consistent service has made a meaningful impact on food insecurity in the New River Valley. By helping redirect thousands of pounds of usable food, Linda supports children, seniors, and individuals facing hardship, ensuring more reliable access to nutritious food through local pantry services. Beyond logistics, Linda brings compassion and respect to every interaction. She builds connections with community members and offers a welcoming presence that helps reduce stigma and makes people feel valued when seeking assistance. Linda also supports volunteer coordination and encourages others to get involved, strengthening both operations and community engagement. Her reliability, kindness, and long-term commitment have made her an essential part of Plenty!’s mission and a steady force for good in the community.

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Community Leading Lights



Spencer Ferrell, Floyd County

Spencer Ferrell's long-standing commitment to youth mentorship and community service has made a lasting impact on students and families across Floyd County. For the past eight years, he has faithfully volunteered with Floyd Young Life, investing significant time each week, often 10 to 20 hours, in building relationships with high school students. In his role, Spencer serves as a mentor and leader, guiding multiple student groups through formative years and continuing to support them long after they graduate. His steady presence has helped create a supportive environment where students are cared for, encouraged, and valued. Beyond his involvement with Young Life, Spencer also volunteers with Angels in the Attic, further reflecting his commitment to serving others in practical and meaningful ways. Despite the demands of his professional career, he consistently prioritizes his volunteer commitments, showing a deep sense of faithfulness and service. His influence extends beyond direct mentoring, as other local leaders look to his example of consistency, wisdom, and quiet leadership.

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Nikki Garland, Montgomery County

Nikki Garland's volunteer service is a cornerstone of community life in Montgomery County, reflecting her dedication to education, youth development, and civic engagement. She serves with the Auburn Eagle Pride PTSO and Auburn Middle School PTO, where she helps coordinate fundraisers, organize teacher appreciation efforts, and strengthen communication between families and school leadership. Her work supports both students and educators while enhancing learning opportunities. Beyond the school system, Nikki is a Sunday School teacher at Grace Life Church, where she mentors youth and encourages leadership, empathy, and community values. She also serves on the Ridgewood Swim Club Board, helping oversee operations, safety, and programming for a valued community space. With more than a decade of service, Nikki consistently steps into leadership roles, strengthening the organizations she supports through both organization and care, helping create a more connected and resilient community.

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Community Leading Lights



Charlie Herbert, Giles County

Charlie Herbert's volunteer service in Giles County reflects more than a decade of consistent, hands-on leadership focused on food access, youth education, and community connection in the New River Valley. As founder of the Giles Community Garden, he created a lasting resource that continues to provide fresh produce and learning opportunities for local residents. Through NRV Thrive and Healthy Roots NRV, Charlie has helped strengthen regional food systems and improve coordination among food assistance organizations. His efforts have supported the movement of over 132,000 pounds of food since 2024, ensuring that families, pantries, and housing communities have reliable access to nutritious food. Charlie also leads summer garden camps for children, where he teaches gardening skills, healthy habits, and teamwork in a supportive, hands-on environment. These programs build confidence and introduce youth to healthier lifestyles. In addition, he serves in leadership roles at Christ Episcopal Church and helped co-found the Giles Breakfast Lions Club. Known for his humility and steady leadership, Charlie brings people together to solve problems and strengthen his local community.

* * *

Trish Knighton, Montgomery County

Trish Knighton is a dedicated volunteer with the Salvation Army New River Valley, where she is a key part of the soup kitchen team. She cooks and prepares meals twice a week and often comes in on additional days to help with prep work, organization, and food pantry support, including packing and distributing food bags to clients. Her commitment goes beyond scheduled hours. Trish consistently shows up when needed and is known for stepping in without being asked. She helps prepare nearly 200 meals each week, ensuring individuals and families in need receive not only nutritious food but also dignity and kindness. Trish's impact in the New River Valley is seen in both the meals she helps provide and the welcoming environment she helps create. She greets every guest with a smile and a warm hello, making the soup kitchen a place of comfort during difficult times. She also inspires fellow volunteers through her steady dedication, teamwork, and willingness to serve wherever needed.

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Community Leading Lights



Anne Larsen, Montgomery County

Anne Larsen's volunteer service with Literacy NRV has made a lasting impact on individuals and families across Montgomery County. Since 2018, she has supported adult learners through programs focused on GED completion, English language learning, and financial and digital literacy. She began as a tutor in the GED program at the Montgomery County Jail, where her instruction helped more than 15 individuals earn their GED and prepare for successful re-entry. Anne's role quickly expanded into program development and leadership. She helped create initiatives such as SkillUp VT and Moneywi\$e, which provide workforce and financial skills to underserved populations. In addition, she works one-on-one with learners pursuing goals including citizenship and literacy advancement and supports family literacy programs that strengthen learning across generations. Known for her dedication and adaptability, Anne consistently goes beyond expectations, inspiring fellow volunteers and expanding opportunities for learners throughout the New River Valley.

* * *

Krista Lindsey, Pulaski County

Krista Lindsey's volunteer service has made a lasting difference in Pulaski County through her commitment to keeping local roadways and natural spaces clean. For the past three years, she has worked year-round as a roadside cleanup volunteer, often out daily in all weather conditions to collect litter and improve the appearance of the community. Her efforts include participation in the annual "One Bag Challenge" and support for broader environmental initiatives such as the New River Conservancy. Krista not only collects trash but also bags, loads, and transports it to proper disposal sites. This year alone, she has collected more than 200 bags of trash since January. Her work has been recognized by the Pulaski County Board of Supervisors for her contribution to community cleanliness. Krista's efforts have inspired others to join her, including a fellow volunteer who now regularly participates in cleanup activities across the New River Valley.

Note: Krista Lindsey received multiple nominations this year.

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Community Leading Lights



Tim Mallard, Floyd County

Tim Mallard's steady and compassionate volunteer service has made a meaningful difference in the Floyd County community. For more than three years, he has volunteered with Plenty! Farm & Food Bank, where he supports home delivery services to ensure patrons receive essential items directly and with dignity. His commitment often extends beyond scheduled service, including thoughtful personal contributions such as purchasing socks during winter months to help meet immediate needs. Tim also assists with vehicle maintenance and landscaping tasks, providing behind-the-scenes support that helps keep operations running smoothly. Alongside his work with Plenty!, he supports the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation, showing his commitment to caring for and sustaining the region he calls home. Tim's service is characterized by reliability, humility, and genuine care for others. Through consistent action rather than recognition, he helps create a stronger, more connected community.

* * *

Ken Presser, Floyd County

Ken Presser's dedicated volunteer leadership has played a vital role in strengthening community efforts in Floyd County. He currently serves as board president of Plenty! Farm and Food Bank, where he helps guide organizational direction, supports governance, and ensures alignment with strategic goals. In addition to his leadership role, Ken is a hands-on volunteer who regularly assists in the pantry, participates in Community Meals and events such as Tour de Dirt, and helps coordinate food donations through his involvement with Floyd United Methodist Church. He is also a generous donor, helping to sustain Plenty!'s ability to purchase food when donations are low. Ken's service reaches beyond a single organization; he also volunteers with the Floyd County Historical Museum, supporting his community and helping keep its history alive. Through both leadership and service, he helps reduce food insecurity while fostering connection and collaboration across Floyd County. His steady example encourages others to engage and serve.

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Community Leading Lights



Tom and Debbie Schaefer, Floyd County

Tom and Debbie Schaefer have demonstrated years of dedicated volunteer service to Plenty! Farm and Food Bank and have played a vital role in supporting food access across Floyd County. Together, they regularly pick up food donations from local grocery stores and ensure those resources reach the pantry, helping maintain a steady supply for families in need. Their reliability and consistency make them invaluable to daily operations. In addition to their behind-the-scenes efforts, the Schaefers are key contributors to Plenty!'s annual Tour de Dirt fundraiser. They help coordinate logistics, support participants, and create a welcoming environment for cyclists and community members alike. Their public-facing roles allow them to connect with others and share the mission of Plenty in meaningful ways. Through their long-standing commitment, Tom and Debbie have helped address food insecurity in Floyd County while inspiring others to get involved through their example of steady, hands-on service.

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Christina Shelor, Montgomery County

Christina Shelor's volunteer service with Mountain View Humane Society reflects strong leadership, compassion, and a deep commitment to her community. For several years, she has organized and led pet food drives that support local families and their pets across the New River Valley. She manages every step of the process, including planning, collecting donations, sorting supplies, and coordinating distribution to ensure resources reach those in need efficiently. Christina also plays a key role in engaging others in service. She actively recruits colleagues and volunteers, builds partnerships with local donors, and fosters a collaborative environment where participation feels welcoming and meaningful. Her clear communication, organization, and positive attitude help turn each drive into a successful community effort. Through her consistent leadership, Christina has helped create a reliable and growing support system for pet owners facing hardship. Her work continues to strengthen community connections while meeting an important and often overlooked need in the New River Valley.

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Community Leading Lights



Melanie Smith, Montgomery County

Melanie Smith has dedicated 15 years of volunteer service with the NRV Re-entry Council and New River Community Action VA CARES, where she serves as a facilitator and convenor supporting collaboration for individuals transitioning from incarceration back into the community. As one of the original members of the TOH management committee, she helped establish a foundation for long-term regional impact. Her volunteer work extends across multiple advocacy efforts, including Justice Advocates and the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy, where she supports education and civic engagement around social justice issues. She also volunteers with the NRV Regional Jail Library providing resources to incarcerated individuals and previously served as North American coordinator for Servants to Asia's Urban Poor connecting volunteers to international service opportunities. Melanie's leadership, authenticity, and collaborative approach inspire others to serve, fostering partnerships and encouraging meaningful community involvement across local and global initiatives through sustained service over time.

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Dusty Spence, Radford

Dusty Spence's lifelong commitment to service has made a lasting impact on students, neighbors, and the broader community. At Blacksburg High School, she goes above and beyond her role by dedicating her time and personal resources to maintaining a clothing closet for students in need, ensuring access to clothing, hygiene items, and snacks for those she mentors. In addition to her work with students, Dusty actively promotes blood donation efforts and supports her community through tutoring, mentoring, and assisting elderly neighbors. Despite facing significant health challenges over the past five years, she continues to put others first, demonstrating remarkable resilience and compassion. A recipient of the 2025 LifeChanger of the Year Award, Dusty's influence extends far beyond recognition. Through her leadership in school, church, and community settings, she quietly inspires others to serve, embodying a spirit of generosity and care that strengthens the entire New River Valley.

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Community Leading Lights



Clara Taylor, Montgomery County

Clara Taylor is the founder of From Me to You, an organization she launched in 2020 to support families with young children across the New River Valley. Inspired by her own experience as a new mother, Clara collects donations of baby items including clothing, toys, and essential supplies and thoughtfully assembles care bundles for families in need. One of the most impactful aspects of her work is her dedication to sourcing hard-to-find infant formula for families facing urgent challenges. Clara goes above and beyond, using her network and persistence to locate exactly what is needed. She also ensures that unused donated items are placed in local mini pantries, extending support even further. Since its founding, From Me to You has served more than 2,000 families. As demand has grown, Clara has created opportunities for others to get involved, inspiring community members to donate, volunteer, and support one another through her compassionate, hands-on leadership.

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Natalie Thomas, Floyd County

Natalie Thomas served as a dedicated volunteer farmer with Plenty! Farm and Food Bank during the 2025 growing season, providing essential support to local food production efforts in Floyd County. Her contributions helped increase access to fresh, nutritious produce for families experiencing food insecurity across the New River Valley. Throughout the season, Natalie regularly assisted with planting, weeding, and harvesting crops. She consistently demonstrated a strong work ethic and a willingness to take on physically demanding tasks, including long hours in the greenhouse during the height of summer heat. Her reliability and steady presence helped ensure the farm remained productive during a critical growing period. Beyond her hands-on farm work, Natalie also represented Plenty! in the community in a positive way. She encouraged friends to get involved, helping to broaden volunteer participation and strengthen awareness of the organization's mission. Through her service, Natalie made a meaningful impact by supporting local food production and addressing food insecurity in the NRV.

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Community Leading Lights



Jamie Thompson, Pulaski County

Jamie Thompson has played a vital role in launching and sustaining the Fairlawn Baptist Church Food Pantry and Community Garden, creating a reliable source of food for families in Pulaski County. She manages daily operations, including stocking shelves, organizing donations, and maintaining backstock, often visiting the pantry multiple times a day to ensure it meets community needs. Jamie was also instrumental in building and maintaining the community garden, which provides fresh fruits and vegetables during the summer months. From planting to harvesting, her hands-on approach helps address both food insecurity and access to nutritious options. Beyond operations, Jamie actively recruits volunteers, engages youth, and uses social media to encourage participation and recognize supporters. Her enthusiasm has inspired donations from individuals, businesses, and community groups. Through her leadership, the pantry and garden have provided thousands of dollars in food and served numerous families across the community while strengthening local connections.

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Barbara Vesely, Giles County

Barbara Vesely's volunteer service with the Giles County Christian Service Mission has made a meaningful impact on food access and dignity for families in her community. For more than three years, she has served as the sole shopper for the 512 Food Pantry's self-select program, ensuring shelves are consistently stocked with a wide variety of quality items. She carefully sources food from multiple locations, often traveling throughout the region to find the best value and selection for pantry clients. In addition to shopping, Barbara coordinates regular pickups from Feeding Southwest Virginia twice each week, helping maintain a steady supply of fresh and essential items. Her attention to detail and commitment allows clients to experience the pantry in a way that feels more like a grocery store, promoting dignity and choice. Barbara also engages others in service, including her husband and fellow volunteers, ensuring continuity and support. Her dedication and care make her an invaluable part of the mission and the Giles County community.

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Community Leading Lights



Andrew Walker, Montgomery County

Andrew Walker's decades of volunteer service across Montgomery County reflect a consistent commitment to meeting community needs through action, leadership, and service. He currently serves with the Montgomery County-Blacksburg Kiwanis Club, where he has held every board position and most recently served as Past President, stepping in to lead meetings and coordinate efforts as needed. He is a weekly volunteer at the Blacksburg Interfaith Food Pantry, where he greets guests and assists with eligibility and distribution, helping families receive food with dignity. Andrew also supports the Montgomery County Christmas Store by collecting donations from local schools and assisting in both food and senior shopping departments. His service extends to Micah's Backpacks, where he helps deliver more than 130 food-filled backpacks weekly to Prices Fork Elementary, and to the NRCC ACCE program, where he supports scholarship fundraising logistics. In addition, he volunteers with Christ Episcopal Church and To Our House.

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Jean Woods, Floyd County

Jean Woods is the founder and driving force behind The Perfect Gift Shop, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting children and families in Floyd County. Through her leadership, the organization collects donated items throughout the year and organizes them into meaningful gift opportunities, allowing children to select presents for their parents and loved ones during the holiday season. Jean dedicates countless hours coordinating donations, organizing volunteers, and ensuring the shop operates smoothly each year. Her commitment reflects a deep passion for bringing joy and dignity to families in her community, especially during Christmas time. She works closely with a team of volunteers who help gather, sort, and prepare items, demonstrating her ability to inspire collaboration and community involvement. Her work has created a meaningful local tradition that supports families while fostering generosity and connection among residents. Since its founding around 2017, The Perfect Gift Shop has continued to grow under her steady guidance.

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Lifetime Achievement Leading Lights

Earl Brown, Montgomery County

Earl Brown's lifetime of volunteer service reflects more than four decades of unwavering commitment to the New River Valley. Through his leadership with the Intellectual Disabilities Agency (IDA), the Imagination Library of Montgomery County, and the Coal Mining Heritage Association, he has consistently combined hands-on involvement with strategic vision to strengthen the community. As chair of the IDA board, Earl has played a vital role in expanding programs that support individuals with intellectual disabilities and their families. From organizing social events and activities to leading major fundraisers, he ensures the organization remains vibrant and impactful. His ability to connect with donors and volunteers has been critical to sustaining IDA's mission.

Earl's work with the Imagination Library has helped bring books and early literacy opportunities to thousands of local children. As both a board and steering committee member, he actively develops outreach strategies, recruits families, and supports fundraising efforts. His passion for education is further reflected in his decades of service at Margaret Beeks Elementary School and continued involvement in school programs.

In addition, Earl contributes to preserving local history through the Coal Mining Heritage Association and supports community initiatives through the Mt. Tabor Ruritan Club, where he helps lead major fundraising efforts. Known for his humility, reliability, and genuine enthusiasm, Earl inspires others through action. He gives his time generously often behind the scenes, whether volunteering his DJ skills, supporting events, or stepping in wherever needed. His sustained dedication, leadership, and community impact make him a true example of lifetime service in the NRV.

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Lifetime Achievement Leading Lights

Jonathan Evans, M.D., Floyd County

Jonathan Evans has dedicated more than six years of service to Plenty! Farm & Food Bank, making a lasting impact on food access and community wellness in Floyd County and the greater New River Valley. As a former board president and active board member, he has provided steady, thoughtful leadership, helping guide the organization's growth while ensuring it remains focused on serving those most in need. Jonathan's commitment extends far beyond leadership roles. He is a regular volunteer at the weekly pantry, where he works directly with individuals and families, offering not only food assistance but also kindness and a listening ear. His presence helps create a welcoming environment where community members feel supported and valued.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Jonathan stepped forward in an especially meaningful way. Drawing on his background as a physician, he volunteered his time to help administer vaccines, playing a critical role in protecting the health of the community during a time of uncertainty and fear. His calm demeanor and dedication provided reassurance to many. Jonathan's passion for service is evident in everything he does. He mentors others, supports events, and consistently looks for ways to strengthen the organization's impact. His example has inspired fellow volunteers and community members to get involved, creating a ripple effect of service. Through his leadership, compassion, and hands-on involvement, Jonathan embodies the spirit of lifetime volunteerism. His contributions have strengthened Plenty! and improved the lives of countless individuals, leaving a legacy of care, resilience, and community connection that will be felt for years to come.

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Lifetime Achievement Leading Lights

James (Jim) Lawrence, Montgomery County

James (Jim) Lawrence has demonstrated extraordinary, sustained volunteer service with The YMCA at Virginia Tech for more than five decades. His involvement began as a Virginia Tech student around 1971 and has continued through his professional career and into retirement, where his engagement with the YMCA remains constant and deeply active. Jim currently serves on the YMCA Board of Directors and is the Board Treasurer, where he helps guide financial oversight and organizational direction. Beyond governance, he is known for stepping into nearly any role where help is needed. He supports outreach programming, completes hands-on projects, and consistently fills gaps to ensure YMCA services continue smoothly.

His practical contributions include carpentry work, general facility maintenance, mowing, parking lot striping, and assisting with setup and logistics for events and displays throughout YMCA buildings. He also serves as a substitute delivery and pickup driver when needed, ensuring continuity in daily operations. Jim has also contributed directly to programming. He has taught Tai Chi as a volunteer instructor, participated in YMCA clogging groups, supported student tutoring programs since his early involvement, and engaged in community initiatives such as Conversation NRV. He remains active on committees including the Craft Fair Committee, tailgate monitoring for game days, and fundraising efforts. His impact across the New River Valley is significant. Through his service, YMCA programs supporting youth development, food access, senior engagement, the arts, and community gathering spaces have all been strengthened. His behind-the-scenes work ensures that programs remain accessible, welcoming, and well-supported. Jim leads by example. Whether as a student volunteer or longtime board leader, he consistently demonstrates humility, reliability, and a strong sense of responsibility to his community. He is widely recognized for noticing needs and addressing them without hesitation. Across more than 50 years of service, Jim has become a foundational figure at the YMCA at Virginia Tech and a model of lifelong volunteerism.



Past Leading Lights Distinguished Recipients

High School

Taylor Hawkins, Floyd
Jessica Shelburne, Pulaski
Connor Moran, Christiansburg
Aaron Miller, Radford
Olivia Hodge, Blacksburg
Rebecca Kay Stephens, Giles
Laura Froggard, Blacksburg
Anna Keppel-Benson, Blacksburg
Jessica Vance, Blacksburg
Marie Stump, Christiansburg
Ben Webster, Snowville
Neha Hudait, Blacksburg
Megan Talarek, Blacksburg
Hannah Shuff, Narrows
Mackenzie Farmer, Pulaski
Clay Jennings, Blacksburg
Lacy Bailey, Auburn
Anna French, Christiansburg
Brianna Moser, Narrows
Grace Trent, Narrows
Thai Yuvanavattana, Floyd
December Ward, Pulaski
Sarah Harvey, Radford
Naisha Hudait, Blacksburg
Alexandria Woodward, Floyd
Tess Larsen, Blacksburg
Athithi Prakash Suganya, Blacksburg

College

Kyndal Stakes, Virginia Tech
Sydney Curtis, Virginia Tech
Kelly Berry, Virginia Tech
Elizabeth Domann, Virginia Tech
Austin Larrowe, Virginia Tech
Chelsea Hall, Virginia Tech
Ryan Brock, Virginia Tech
Analise Adams, Virginia Tech
Victoria Sarbin, Radford University
Matthew Johnson, Virginia Tech
Stephanie Connelly, Virginia Tech
Hunter Cole, NRCC
Olivia Obertello, Virginia Tech
Clendal Brown, NRCC
Tanah Patel, Virginia Tech
Danielle Kassel, Virginia Tech
Addison Levy, NRCC
Grace Ankeney, NRCC
Jarrett Holmes & Erica Martin, Virginia Tech
Aaron Howard, NRCC
Abigail Ridpath, NRCC
Cara Newbill, Virginia Tech
Madison Webb, NRCC
Sydney Hardwicke, NRCC
The Big Event, Virginia Tech
Makala Davis, Radford University

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Past Leading Lights Distinguished Recipients

Community Members

Susan Sutterer, Floyd
Ann Goette, Eggleston
Diane Blair, Pulaski
Jean Umberger, Radford
Scott & Mendy Sink, Blacksburg
Barnett Carr, Blacksburg
Susan Icove, Floyd
Donna & Doug Martin, Newport
Ben Crawford, Blacksburg
Melvin Robertson, Christiansburg
Nancy & Bill Hudson, Fairlawn
Keith Nunn, Radford
Todd Fitch, Christiansburg
Molly McClintock, Christiansburg
Dr. Steve Jacobs, Blacksburg
Mary Susan Vehorn, Radford
Col. John Getgood, Floyd
Doris Hendrickson, Radford
Kim Schwenk, Blacksburg
Jerry Higgins, Radford
Rebecca Rees, Blacksburg
Lindsay West, Blacksburg
Phyllis Albritton, Blacksburg
Pat Ballard, Christiansburg
Mary Ann Hinshelwood, Christiansburg
John McEnhill, Floyd
Dr. Nelda Pearson, Radford
Margie Vitale, Christiansburg
Karen Cronin, Shawsville
Fran Rooker, Radford
Rador Vaden, Blacksburg
Vickie Spangler, Floyd
Lynn Hill, Giles
Archie Boothe, Pulaski
Penny Sweet, Radford
Janne Mathes, Blacksburg
John Galbraith, Blacksburg
Travis Cantrell, Floyd
Rodman Freeman, Giles
Daniel Grubb, Pulaski
Kelly McPherson, Blacksburg
Janiele Hamden, Radford
John Hess, Christiansburg
Rhonda Whaling, Blacksburg
Sharon Thompson, Blacksburg
Rebecca (Becky) Weeks, Floyd
Travis Sparks, Giles
Sally Warburton, Pulaski
Dr. Daniel Kelly, Radford
Elizabeth Warriner, Floyd
Hope Harrell, Pearisburg
Darla Bray, Blacksburg
Martha Ann Stallings, Blacksburg
Kathryn Daily, Radford
Jean Woods, Floyd
Morris Fleischer, Giles
Teresa Cassell, Blacksburg
Vern Simpson, Blacksburg
Harriet Berry, Pulaski
Garnie Dishon, Radford
Greg Sazonov, Floyd
Larry Greene, Giles
Debbie Sherman-Lee, Christiansburg
Susan Madison, Blacksburg
John Ross, Pulaski
Janell Dobbins, Radford
Amanda Morgan, Floyd
Dr. Wendy Baldwin, Blacksburg
Ruth Grene, Blacksburg
Sally McCarthy, Pulaski



Past Leading Lights Distinguished Recipients

Dr. Florence H. Mogen, Radford
Kim O'Donnell, Floyd
Faye Cofer, Pearisburg
Judy Diggs, Christiansburg
Gunin Kiran, Blacksburg
Mandy Farris, Dublin
Elena Abalde-Sanchez, Radford

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Lifetime Achievement

Catherine Vaughn Pauley, Floyd
Don Mullins, Blacksburg
Merilyn & Dave Armstrong, Dublin
Dr. George Smith, Shawsville
Tom Sherman, Blacksburg
Carol Smith, Draper
Dave Roper, Blacksburg
Bill Ellenbogen, Blacksburg
Susan Icove, Floyd
Judith Hess Jones, Blacksburg
Dr. Richard Harshberger, Radford
Bonnie Graham, Pulaski



 New River Valley Leading Lights

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*Program Production: NRV Leading Lights Public Relations team
Original Design: Lindsey Gleason*

