SINA’s 13th Annual REACH Awards Ceremony

Tuesday, June 4, 2018
5:00 pm - 8:00 pm

Trinity College
Washington Room in Mather Hall
300 Summit Street
Hartford, CT 06106
Violins:
Germania D’Amore
Metzley Cardoso
Saira Valencia
Génesis Guerrero
Samuel D’Amore
Angel Soto
Europa Tellez

Trumpet:
Katerina Soto
Nicholas D’Amore

Armonía:
Gabriel Medina
Jadilez Robles
Morelby D’Amore
Jairo Rangel
Program

Masters of Ceremonies
Stephen Balcanoff
Manager, Non-Medical Services
Connecticut Children’s Medical Center

Linda Torres
Office Administrator and Project Manager
Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

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Welcome
Jane Baird
SINA Board Chair
Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

Melvyn Colón
Executive Director
Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

Dickens Mathieu
General Counsel and Secretary of the College
Trinity College

Lawrence E. Milan
Vice President & Chief Human Resources Officer
Connecticut Children’s Medical Center

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Dinner Entertainment by: Maríachi Corazón de Oro

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Awards Presentation
SINA Student Support Scholarship
Presented By: Karolina Kwiecinska, Ariel Pino, and Linda Torres

SINA / Ivan A. Backer Scholarship
Presented By: Nilda Fernandez, Elsa Huertas and Steve Balcanoff

STEM Scholarship

Neighborhood Service Award
Presented By: Mary Fattouh and Yessica Amparo, Nilda Fernandez, and Aaron Gill

Institutional Award
Presented By: Patricia McIntosh

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Closing Remarks
Ivan A. Backer Scholarship

The SINA / Ivan A. Backer Scholarship program was established in 1997 in honor of Ivan Backer, who served as president of SINA for nearly 20 years. The recipients are selected based on service to community, school, family, and academic achievement. The scholarship consists of three awards of $4,000 ($1,000 per year for 4 years) to Bulkeley High School seniors continuing their education at an accredited 4-year postsecondary program.

2019 Scholarship Recipients

**Dyansti U. Johnson**
“I have witnessed the differences that can be made by offering support where it is needed, and the smiles that can be achieved.” Dynasti plans on studying film at The School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, NY in hopes of becoming a screenwriter.

**Alondra M. Rodriguez**
“I have one goal behind everything I’ve ever done; make the greatest impact I possibly can in my community.” Alondra plans on attending Springfield College to begin her study in the Sports Management Program in hopes of becoming an Athletic Director/Trainer.

**Yoel O. Veras Cerda**
“Acting participation in community service has taught me a lot of things that are going to help me through my journey in life. I like to challenge myself; find what I can fix to make myself a better person. You can do anything if you put in the effort.” Yoel plans to attend UConn, Hartford campus to major in Mathematics and minor in Education.
SINA Student Support Scholarship

The SINA Student Support Scholarship program was established in 2012. The purpose of the program is to provide much needed financial support to students who are attending Capital Community College (CCC). One to four scholarships in the combined amount of $2,000 per year will be awarded annually to students on a full or part time basis, who reside in the 06106 or 06114 zip codes, and who have completed at least one semester of study.

Regine Cassagnol

Regine Cassagnol came to Hartford from Haiti to pursue an education and achieve her dream of becoming a nurse. She wants to make a difference, while proving to her family and the community what can be achieved with determination. Having seen poor people in Haiti suffer from diseases that are easily treated, she wants to obtain an education that will allow her to help people attain better health. “Regine is a very patient, dedicated and courageous student who is working hard, and whose family can’t help her with college expenses.” Pierre Johanne, Nurse.
Nathaniel Rose

Nathaniel Rose is a construction management student at Capitol Community College who plans to attend the University of Hartford to pursue a career as an architect. Besides working to help defray college costs, he maintains strong grades while managing his diabetes and finding time to volunteer at school. “He has demonstrated solid leadership abilities as a math and science tutor, in student government, and as vice president of the Anime Club. He is always willing to help fellow students.” Derrick Curry, Director of Student Activities, Capitol Community College.
Cindy Otchere

Cindy Otchere is a biology major at Hartford Job Corps Academy who was sent to live with her African grandfather as a child. His death from heart disease brought her back to the U.S. for high school and inspired her to become a cardiologist. She maintains very high grades while volunteering as student government treasurer and president of the debate club. “Cindy is an outstanding human being – reliable, trustworthy, intelligent, humble and kind. She will bring integrity to her career as a doctor.” Roberta Mills, ACT/OCT Coordinator, Hartford Job Corps Academy.
Connecticut Children’s Information Solutions STEM Scholarship

The staff at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center Information Solutions Department decided to put together a scholarship opportunity to a deserving student that is interested in continuing their education in a post-secondary program related to Science Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). The scholarship is for a total of $3,550 ($1775/year x 2) and will be awarded to graduating seniors. The scholarships are renewable at $1775 per academic year for two years, as long as the student is in good standing.

Tajon Nickson

“I feel like I am meant to do big things, things that will benefit the world and the people living in it,” Tajon Nickson, Bulkeley High School senior. Tajon is planning to attend the University of Connecticut (UConn) to begin his studies in the Mechanical Engineering program in hopes of becoming an Aeronautical Engineer. Tajon’s interest in aeronautics began when he had the opportunity to tour Pratt & Whitney, a Connecticut-based aerospace manufacturer with global service operations. After the field trip, Tajon directed his school work toward STEM-related classes taking Computer Science, AP Statistics, Pre-Calculus, and AP Computer Principles. He began to learn more about engineering and the steps he will need to take to reach his goal. “Tajon’s ability to shine through was always apparent. He is not only a great student but he is also very humble…. I can’t wait to see the great things he will achieve.” wrote Diana Ayrula, Tajon’s former Mathematics Instructional Coach.
Connecticut Children's Institutional Award

Each year SINA gives out an Institutional Award that recognizes and honors an employee from one of our three institutions. This individual goes beyond the call of duty and contributes significantly to the betterment of the Hartford neighborhoods.

Tessa Whitten

Tessa Whitten is a newcomer to Connecticut, but she has already made significant commitments to the community. She is a Certified Child Life Specialist, or CCLS, at Connecticut Children’s Medical Center. This hospital discipline helps children cope with whatever medical situation they are facing. Practitioners hold advanced degrees in psychology, child development, or education. A CCLS assesses a child’s cognitive stage in order to support them appropriately. This might require diversions so they are less nervous about a procedure, explanations about the progression of an illness, or dealing with end-of-life and memory making.

All this could be stressful, yet Tessa’s commitment to children is unwavering even in her spare time. Once or twice
a week Tessa coordinates outreach with her church group, volunteering at a Boys and Girls Club through a program called “Food for Thought.” A half dozen kids learn about family dining and etiquette at a dinner where they are each paired with a caring adult. The adult asks about the child’s day, listens carefully and shows they care. As Tessa explains, “caring and being consistent is very valuable. Every child needs this, and I get more from them than they do from me.”

Growing up in a small Louisiana town, Tessa always intended to leave. When she was offered an internship in her very competitive field, she jumped on the opportunity to come to Connecticut Children’s. Tessa’s work was so good that she was offered a position after her internship. Patricia McIntosh, the manager of Child and Family Support Services, is a former REACH committee member and a former SINA board member. She says Tessa’s “spirit is delightful. She’s only been with us since August, but is already actively involved. It’s very impressive.”

Tessa raves about her job and her adopted state, saying “I didn’t know a soul here and hoped I’d find good people, and I did. I love Connecticut. I found a great church and made friends. Even the weather is amazing – we have four seasons!” She has made Connecticut home, and while she was “so surprised and shocked, honestly,” to get the award, Tessa also laughingly admits “I’m such a pizza snob now!”

Her passion for working with children stems in part from her experience with a Boys and Girls Club in Louisiana. Tessa explains “no matter where you are in the country, kids are kids. They all need the same things. I know I can make a difference.” We are lucky to have her here, making a difference by helping the children of our community.
Neighborhood Service Awards

The Neighborhood Service Awards recognize individuals in the community who have made outstanding contributions to Hartford neighborhoods.

Samuel DeCarlo

Sam DeCarlo’s route to managing Our Piece of the Pie’s youth programs was unusual, but since finding his calling he has never stopped. Trained in graphic design, then working in construction when the housing market crashed, Sam was hired as an assistant for a program that taught woodworking and boat building. He explains, “I like to pick up new things, try them out and do my best at it.”

Still young himself, Sam found it easy to connect with the youth served by OPP. He kept growing, working his way up to Director of Youth Services Corps. Sam says “the thing that
keeps me here is I love building relationships and working with youth. Everyone has their own story, and I want to help them reach their potential.”

Yessica Amparo, who nominated Sam, declares “he believes in you, and never says no to youth. Sam always puts our youth first, thinking about the future, and that’s what we need. He gives them the freedom they need to be creative.” She also praises Sam’s management style, explaining that he is a great mentor who is actively training staff to be out in the community. She says “Sam always has an open heart for any idea. He is a good listener who is not judgmental. Sam is open-minded and cordial, working hard for the community. He is the reason we are here.”

For his part, Sam insists that the team atmosphere and relationships keep him going. He says “I always try to support staff, because they work hard and are hands-on.” Sam also explains that his family and kids help him relax, saying family and staff are the key to his success.
Marion Griffin

Marion Griffin has always volunteered, and she served on numerous boards in her corporate days. She attributes her penchant for volunteerism to her father’s example and her teaching background, suggesting “that makes me want to help people grow.” She moved to Frog Hollow in 2001, when she began attending meetings of the Neighborhood Revitalization Zone. Since retirement she has become very active, currently serving as the co-chair of Hartford 2000, the NRZ umbrella organization. As she says, “if I’m in, I’m in. If I can’t completely commit, I turn it down.”

The community has benefited from this approach as Marion has become a vocal advocate for the neighborhood and for Hartford. She enjoys trying to solve problems, such as the traffic issues around neighborhood schools. Marion explains “there are so many assets the city has that don’t get their due."
We need to blow our own horns, take control of the narrative and take pride. It’s important to get our voices heard.”

Aaron Gill, who nominated Marion, insists that “whenever we need a volunteer, she steps up and makes sure the voice of the neighborhood is heard.” He says Marion connects the Frog Hollow NRZ to the rest of the city and increases communication between neighborhoods citywide, helping to brainstorm solutions and share knowledge. Aaron explains “there are countless other small things, where we need someone to be our voice and ears. Marion is always among the first to say “I’ll do it.””

According to Marion, who is surprised and honored to receive the award, her philosophy is “you see something that needs to be done, and if you can, you do it.” We are all the richer for her willingness to step up.
Captain Mario Oquendo, Jr.

Captain Mario Oquendo heads the Hartford Fire Department’s Special Services Unit, managing outreach and risk reduction through work with NRZs, Fire Explorers and other organizations. Mario says “I enjoy public service and mentoring students. We teach prevention, steer kids in the right direction and are the face of the department.”

He works with CERT, a natural disaster team, and with Hartford Human Services or Red Cross to find housing for people displaced by fires. This has special meaning for Mario because two weeks after he, his wife and baby had moved out of an apartment building, it caught fire. Deliberately set, due to a drug dispute, the fire killed two of his neighbors. This motivated Mario to become a fire-
fighter and, after eleven years in the firehouse, to join Special Services. As he explains, “I felt I owed it to them to work with the community to prevent fires, to engage with people and teach them how to stay safe.”

Edward Casares has known Mario since he joined the department 20 years ago. He nominated him because “it’s not just a job for Mario. He goes above and beyond, with a passion I haven’t seen in anyone else.” He insists “you can’t reduce incidents if you can’t reach people. You have to see Mario in action to believe your eyes. His interpersonal skills are off the chart. Any organization he’s worked with has nothing but good to say.”

Mario says the support of his wife of 25 years and two wonderful kids enables him to do everything he does – including public speaking. He claims “I’d rather run into a burning building than speak into a mike, but this job has changed me as a person.”
REACH Committee

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Nilda Fernandez  
UConn Health / Connecticut Children’s Medical Center

Elsa Huertas  
Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

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*Executive Committee Member
REACH is sponsored by SINA and its member institutions:
Trinity College,
Connecticut Children’s Medical Center,
and Hartford Hospital

The REACH Committee’s mission is to develop, support and recognize individuals who positively contribute to the growth of the Hartford Community.