



**41st Annual Mayor's Medal of Honor
December 6, 2024
Rochester, Minnesota**

Media Packet

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Mayor's Medal of Honor | 2024 Honorees

Artistic / Cultural Achievement Award

Nicole Nfonoyim-Hara

Ever since this community member made Rochester her home, she has been working to uplift and celebrate the underrepresented voices of our community. She was a close collaborator of the late Danny Solis to create the Day of the Dead programming, she has supported the Somalia Rebuild organization with grant writing, represented Rochester through the PBS R-Town program, and worked with Mayo Clinic and DMC to support BIPOC students and artists as they reimagined Peace Plaza.

She is a writer herself, and has been selected for a number of prestigious fellowships and grant awards from the Loft Literary Center, Minnesota State Arts Board, Givens Foundation for African American Literature, and VONA/Voices of Our Nation. Her arts writing has been featured on Mn Artists and exhibition catalogues for the MCAD-Jerome Foundation Fellowships for Early Career Artists and the Great Northern Festival blog. Her writing on being Black and multiracial appears in the anthology *Other Tongues: Mixed-Race Women Speak Out*, and has been published in *Joyland* and *the Offing*, and more.

Most recently, this amazing woman personally invested in the creation of Griot Arts, Rochester's first bookstore and gallery featuring the work and stories of BIPOC individuals. Not only is this physical space contributing to the vitality of our downtown and our local economy, but it has also quickly become a beloved space for Black artists, poets, and community members. She has created programming for people of all ages and walks of life, including poetry readings, kids art classes, plant care classes, and much more. She has partnered with organizations such as Threshold Arts and the NAACP to have a Griot Arts presence at various art markets, community celebrations, and the Juneteenth celebration.

Nicole Nfonoyim-Hara is dedicated to shining the light on others, telling the untold stories, and truly invests in and celebrates Rochester. I'm excited to see what more she will do for our community.

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Champion of Diversity Award

Rawhi Said

This remarkable candidate for the Mayor's Medal of Honor for Champion of Diversity, has dedicated his life to promoting inclusivity, equity, and opportunities for marginalized communities in Rochester. His personal story as a first-generation Bosnian refugee shapes his mission, which goes beyond overcoming adversity to actively creating spaces where others can succeed.

This honoree's family fled the Bosnian genocide, enduring the trials of refugee life before eventually resettling in Rochester, Minnesota. From an early age, he saw the transformative power of community support, especially through organizations like the Franciscan Sisters of Rochester, who helped his family find a sense of belonging after their displacement. These formative experiences gave him a deep empathy for the struggles refugees and immigrants face when starting over in a new land.

Currently, he serves as the Program Director for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the Mayo Clinic, where his primary focus is recruiting diverse candidates into medical school. His efforts are breaking down barriers that often prevent individuals from underrepresented backgrounds from entering the healthcare field. By expanding access to medical education for people of all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, he is ensuring that future healthcare providers reflect the diversity of the communities they serve.

One of his standout achievements is his leadership of the Mayo RISE program, an initiative designed to introduce youth from underserved communities to careers in healthcare. Through mentorship and exposure, he is helping young people from marginalized backgrounds realize that they too can pursue careers in the medical field. By providing them with the tools, guidance, and inspiration to succeed, he is paving the way for a more inclusive and diverse healthcare workforce.

In addition to his work at Mayo Clinic, this honoree also serves as a board member for First Alliance Credit Union. In this role, he continues his commitment to underserved populations by ensuring that financial services remain accessible to those who need them most, particularly those who have been traditionally excluded from banking systems.

Rawhi Said's unwavering dedication to promoting diversity in both healthcare and financial services, coupled with his personal resilience and leadership, make him an exceptional candidate for the Mayor's Medal of Honor for Champion of Diversity.

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Community-Wide Service Award

Mike Schmitt

This honoree's unwavering commitment to the Rochester community exemplifies the spirit of this esteemed award. As a dedicated volunteer, he has significantly impacted various facets of our local culture and well-being. He has been a steadfast supporter of the Rochester running community, dedicating countless hours to volunteering at races, where he not only helps with logistics but also inspires and mentors runners of all ages and abilities, ensuring that everyone feels welcomed and supported.

His role as the founder and President of the Friends of the Rochester Farmer's Market has revitalized our local economy, fostering connections between farmers and consumers while promoting healthy eating and sustainability. Under his leadership, the Farmer's Market flourished, providing a vibrant gathering space for community members to engage with local produce and artisans in its new location.

Additionally, this community member has served on the Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee, where he has been an influential voice for safer, more accessible transportation options in our city. His dedication, first as a member and later as President, has resulted in tangible improvements that benefit all residents, promoting a culture of health and sustainability through active transportation.

His deep-rooted passion for our community is evident in every initiative he undertakes, as he continually seeks ways to uplift others and enhance the quality of life for all Rochester residents. His selflessness and tireless advocacy have inspired many to engage in community service, fostering a spirit of collaboration and unity.

Honoring Mike Schmitt today not only celebrates his remarkable contributions but also highlights the importance of community service in creating a stronger, more connected Rochester, and his exemplary dedication truly embodies the values we cherish.

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Educational Excellence Award

Debra Las

Generations of students have come to love science with this remarkable educator. She has been teaching for 33 years, focused on 8th grade science at John Adams Middle School. She teaches the highly gifted and Physical Science classes and co-teaches multilingual learner science classes.

She has been the backbone of the STEM Mentoring Labs at John Adams, an after-school STEM research program for middle school students underrepresented in STEM run by local non-profit Oraculi. She has been a passionate supporter of STEM, research, and enrichment, and has been a Board Member of Oraculi since its inception in 2020.

In addition to dedicating precious after school hours to supporting the STEM Mentoring Labs, she also runs and encourages students to participate in eCybermission, a national competition where students work in teams using STEM to solve community problems. In recent years, her students have gone on to be recognized at the national level for their work. And on top of all of this, she ensures family members can stay involved with STEAM Family Nights, opportunities for students to display their work.

She is an inimitable force of nature for STEM education and engagement, and yet if you spoke to her, she would not mention her own strengths as a teacher and mentor. Instead, you would only hear stories of her students' enthusiasms for and achievements in science, technology, engineering and mathematics projects inside and outside the classroom.

This educator was recently recognized at the national level and awarded a STEM Research Grant from Society for Science as one of 41 educators across the US. She is an inimitable force of nature for STEM, education, and engagement. John Adams, Rochester, Minnesota, and beyond - all these communities are so lucky to have Ms. Debra Las championing STEM for students year after year.

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Excellence in Industry Award

Nick Stageberg

This nominee is a true game-changer, transforming the rental experience in Rochester with passion and purpose. He is an individual who was a 2001 graduate of John Marshall, moved away from Rochester for about 15 years, and has been back for 8 years - and during these last 8 years he has enjoyed building a large business that impacts about 5% of Rochester residents all while knowing this has been his home since childhood. His commitment goes beyond business—it's about creating a sense of home and belonging. Though focus on creating warm, welcoming, renovated, high quality living experiences across a variety of communities throughout Rochester he has reshaped the culture of property management. His dedication to personal and professional growth has uplifted not only the company but the lives of everyone on his team.

His impact extends well beyond company walls. He has revitalized once-neglected buildings, turning them into inviting spaces that foster community. His tireless efforts have breathed new life into Rochester's rental market, creating not just buildings, but homes.

Yet, his contributions don't stop there. This community member is deeply engaged, actively partnering with the Rochester Police Department for events like Safe City Nights and Shop with a Cop. He was proudly elected Grand Marshall of the Rochesterfest parade for 2023 and continues to delight the community as Santa's 1st Helper for Rescue Santa, hosted by the RDA, for three years running. His dedication, kindness, and generosity make him a beloved figure in the community.

He has proven that success can be shared and that you can have a thriving business while giving back. His selflessness, leadership, and relentless pursuit of excellence have set a new standard for property management in Rochester. For his remarkable contributions to the industry, his transformative leadership, and his heartfelt commitment to community, he truly deserves to be honored with this award - please join me in honoring Nick Stageberg (Staw-guh-berg) for the Excellence in industry award.

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Heroism Award

Chad Wedul

On behalf of the Lowertown Neighborhood Association, we want to recognize our neighbor for his actions during a violent burglary and disturbance at his apartment building on Sunday, October 13th. His calm demeanor and clarity of mind helped contain potential danger and prevented further escalation. Upon hearing the ruckus, this honoree exited his apartment and calmly told the intruder to sit down and stay back. He then helped others exit the building while keeping tensions as calm as possible until police arrived on the scene.

Furthermore, his presence with neighbors the following days reassured them and helped restore calm to the area. His approachable demeanor and willingness to sit and talk with neighbors around an outdoor fireplace showed another aspect of his character and warmed those around him. We are proud to call Mr. Chad Wedul our neighbor!

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Human Services Award

Dr. Annah I. Adepoju

This visionary humanitarian and CEO of Divine Immigration and Educational Consultancy in the United States and Dominion and Shalom International in Nigeria, she has profoundly impacted communities across two continents, addressing pressing issues faced by immigrants and underserved populations.

Her unwavering commitment to community development and social upliftment has been evident through her work providing legal, educational, and social support to immigrants navigating complex integration processes in the United States. In Nigeria, she has led programs addressing key challenges such as poverty and education, empowering communities with resources and sustainable opportunities that enable self-sufficiency. Her work reflects a compassionate and strategic approach, creating solutions that resonate across cultural boundaries.

This honoree's leadership qualities are evident not only in her impactful community programs but also in her resilience and dedication to fostering unity. A devout Catholic, she views her humanitarian work as an extension of her faith, embodying the values of charity, compassion, and social justice. Her efforts exemplify a commitment to lifting up the less privileged and inspiring unity, compassion, and equity in every community she serves.

Her contributions have earned her numerous prestigious awards, including the United States President's Lifetime Achievement Award and the United Nations Peace Ambassador Award, both of which recognize her significant global impact on human welfare and peace-building. These accolades further affirm her alignment with the principles celebrated by the Mayor's Medal of Honor, highlighting her long-standing dedication to enhancing the lives of those in need.

What truly sets her apart is her cross-continental impact. She bridges cultural and social divides, bringing lasting solutions to immigrant communities in the United States and marginalized groups in Nigeria. Her leadership has transcended borders, empowering individuals and families with tools for growth and opportunities for success.

In every aspect, Dr. Anna Adepoju embodies the spirit of humanitarian leadership that the Mayor's Medal of Honor seeks to celebrate. Her life's work serves as a beacon of hope, resilience, and compassion, making her a truly deserving candidate for the award.

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Legacy Award

Sheila Kiscaden

This honoree has given her all in this community and she's done it in so many ways.

She has worked in the non-profit and public sector serving as a consultant, facilitator, coordinator, and project manager early in her career in Rochester. She has been an educator in various ways over many years focusing on policy, public health, corrections, advocacy and political leadership, and community involvement. Her work focus has been in human services, justice, and women's issues (workforce and healthcare).

In addition to professional and academic roles, this individual has volunteered to train and mentor others (More Women on the Move), expand economic opportunities regionally (SE MN Together), and global volunteering serving as chair, as well as serving on the boards of 16+ non-profits and many state committees and global services. Her focus on supporting women in their growth in leadership is remarkable and has made an indelible impact on Rochester. This exceptional individual has been a State Senator and County Commissioner.

Thank you, Sheila Kiscaden, for this amazing legacy.

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Mayor's Award

Dean Stenehjem

This honoree has dedicated himself to the community of Rochester through his professional career, personal life and faith to do good deeds for the citizens of Rochester. He worked at the Y.M.C.A. for thirty-three years and was its director. The mission of the Y.M.C.A. is to empower youth and communities to build a just, equitable and inclusive world, where every person can thrive in body, mind and spirit.

He was the Foundation/Development Director at the Rochester Senior Center Foundation for seven years, whose mission is to provide social, recreational, education, health maintenance, and economic and financial programs for the senior population of Rochester.

He has spent the last nine years of his professional career as the Foundation and Development Leader at Samaritan Bethany, whose mission is to care for seniors through assisted living, memory care, nursing home care and independent living.

In addition to all his career accomplishments, he devoted his time and efforts to other organizations in the community as well. He is a member of the Rochester Rotary, whose motto is, "Service Above Self" each and every day and he and his wife have been active members at Gloria Dei Church, their place of worship. He served on the first board of directors of the Channel One Food Bank and on the board of the Rochester Choral Arts. He has been very active in committee work for the United Way and a community representative for the Mayo Clinic Nurse Anesthetist program and a community representative at the Federal Medical Center Prison here in Rochester.

Please help me recognize Dean Stenehjem for this year's Mayor's Award for his dedication to the Rochester community.

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Personal Achievement Award

William “Bud” Whitehorn Jr.

Twenty-six years ago this community member made some bad decisions that lead to his being charged and sentenced as a felon. He moved to Rochester and has worked to turn his life around by serving his community in many ways. In addition to a running a business, he has worked with others to create a number of organizations and services to assist other community members and prevent others from going down the path he had been down: Hustlers Anonymous, CERT and their programs, as well as his church. This honoree's efforts paid off this year when he sat before the clemency board and won clemency - removing his label as a felon at long last. This honoree's continued work to improve himself and our community is very much appreciated by the City, law enforcement, myself, and the community members he serves with his whole heart. We all benefit when someone puts the community before themselves and William “Bud” Whitehorn Jr. does just that!

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Senior/Elder Achievement Award

Sandra Fitterer

This recipient of the award was chosen for her outstanding volunteer work for the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, for acting as Olmsted County Election Judge, and as a Republican Delegate to the State.

This person, who is 84 years old, does not believe that retirement from work means retirement from serving her community. She was instrumental in combining the six separate parishes of St. Vincent de Paul's relief work into a single unit that serves all of Rochester more effectively with fewer people. She regularly trains volunteers in taking calls and visiting those in need, as well as making visits herself.

She has served for many years as an Election Judge, including as Head Judge when there has been a need. In this year's Primary Election, she served as Head Judge without a backup. She oversaw set-up and take down of the election space and trained the other Election Judges for a 12-hour shift without a break.

As a Delegate to the Republican Party, she has traveled extensively to attend the various caucuses around the state. She also continues to be an active member of Holy Spirit Catholic Church. She serves at funerals and brings the Eucharist ministry to homebound people.

There are few people as involved in community care as Sandra Fitterer. She is a great example for anyone to follow.

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Sustainability Award

Jonny Yucuis

As founder of Rochester Electrified and Rochester Electric Vehicles (REV), this community member has become an invaluable advocate for sustainable practices in Rochester, particularly in promoting the benefits and feasibility of electric vehicles (EVs) and home electrification solutions. His commitment to educating the community about clean, renewable options is shaping a more resilient and environmentally conscious city.

One of his standout contributions is his commitment to accessibility and education. Every year, he leads free electric vehicle classes through Rochester Community Education, making EV knowledge available to anyone interested. These sessions are a key resource for those new to EVs, offering essential insights into costs, maintenance, charging options, and more. He has a hands-on approach to supporting residents in making informed, sustainable choices. By offering these classes free of charge, he removes financial and informational barriers to EV adoption, empowering more individuals to transition to sustainable driving.

In 2023, this honoree launched the Electrify Rochester Expo, designed to make sustainable living accessible for everyone. The event, which attracted over 500 attendees in its inaugural year, is a unique opportunity for residents to explore everything from electric vehicles to home solar power and heat pump technology. Now an annual event, the Expo invites the community to connect with vendors, learn from experts, and see electrification solutions firsthand. Through this Expo, he has created a welcoming, knowledge-rich environment that demystifies sustainable technology, helping residents envision a cleaner, greener future for themselves and the city.

His impact goes beyond events and classes—he has cultivated a supportive community of EV enthusiasts in Rochester through the Rochester Electric Vehicles group. His work fosters connections among EV owners and newcomers, building a culture of sustainability that encourages residents to make more eco-conscious decisions. This group has grown into a trusted local resource, providing real-world advice and guidance that help residents understand the value of electric vehicles in reducing emissions and supporting climate goals, in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs).

His vision for a sustainable Rochester is inspiring a groundswell of change. His multifaceted approach—educating through classes, events, and community engagement—has made it easier for residents to embrace sustainable practices confidently. Many first-time EV owners in Rochester credit this person's guidance and resources as the catalyst for their decision to make the switch. His dedication to cleaner air, renewable energy, and creating a resilient community is helping to build a healthier, more sustainable future for all.

For his unwavering commitment to advancing sustainability in Rochester and his dedication to making sustainable technology accessible to all, thank you, Jonny Yucuis.

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Youth Serving Community Award

Madison Teske

This fifth grade student from the Rochester Public Schools is a remarkable young leader who has dedicated many hours to improving her neighborhood and the environment through her participation in the Adopt-a-Drain program. Known for her drive and dedication, she has made an impact in our community through her service efforts, making her a deserving candidate for the Mayor's Medal of Honor Youth Serving Community Award.

Through her participation in the Ben Franklin & Montessori at Franklin School student council community schoolyard project, she learned about the Adopt-a-Drain program in the spring. Since then, she has adopted and cleaned three storm drains of her own, preventing pollution from entering our area waterways. Her efforts have not only addressed a need in our city but have also inspired other Rochester residents to join the cause. After a story about the Adopt-a-Drain program featuring her aired on KTTC at the beginning of July, there were 15 more people who adopted storm drains in Rochester, crediting the story about this honoree as their reason for signing up for the program.

Her passion for caring for the environment and her community, along with her maturity, initiative, ability to lead by example, and deep sense of responsibility to making Rochester a better place, are all reasons that Madison Teske embodies the spirit of the Mayor's Medal of Honor Youth Serving Community Award. Given Madi's positive influence and contributions at such a young age, there is no doubt that we will continue to witness great things from her as she grows and continues her path of service.