

Volunteers gala honors local changemakers

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Video: Celebrating Volunteers – Marie Waddell [Here](#)



APPLETON - For 20 years, the Celebrating Volunteers gala has shined a spotlight on people working behind the scenes to make the Fox Cities a better place.

And like many who give of their time and talents, not for themselves but to help others, Marie Waddell was quick to point out that her volunteer efforts would not be possible without help.

"I feel very selfish standing up here alone because I could not do what I do all by myself," Waddell said at the 20th annual gala — previously known as Celebrating Our Volunteers — held at the Radisson Paper Valley Hotel. "The Blessings in a Backpack program at Ferber Elementary would not be successful without the phenomenal support group I have had since starting it four years ago."

Waddell, a parent volunteer at Ferber, started the Blessings in a Backpack program to give children in need access to healthy food on the weekends. She received the Daniel P. Spalding Volunteer Educator of the Year Award.

The Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region and The Post-Crescent organize and present the Celebrating Volunteers event, a partnership that has spanned two decades.

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The event was started after Paul and Elaine Groth were killed in a car crash in 1997. The Groths left behind a legacy of community service that made an impression on their peers. A group of their friends got together and decided to honor the Groths by hosting an event to recognize volunteers in the Fox Cities. The first Celebrating Our Volunteers gala was held in 1998 and annually honors people dedicated to mentoring, the arts, education and more.

Community businesses and institutions sponsor the awards. Each winner receives \$5,000 to direct to the Fox Valley charity of their choice. The Youth Scholarship Award winner receives a \$1,500 scholarship and \$1,000 to direct to a local nonprofit organization.



Figure 1 Lee Hillstrom

Peter Kelly, president and CEO of United Way Fox Cities and emcee for the evening, said sponsors have given more than \$660,000 to local nonprofit organizations selected by award recipients over the past 20 years.

"Tonight we continue to honor the incredible legacy of Paul and Elaine Groth," Kelly said.

Those honored Tuesday included:

- Youth Scholarship Award: [Kaylie Bittner](#)
- Health Care Volunteer: [Lee Hillstrom](#)
- Business Partnership Award: [Fox Cities Diaper Bank and Kimberly-Clark Corp.](#)
- Walter L. Rugland Community Service Award: [Jane Dwyre Garton](#)
- Paul and Elaine Groth Mentoring Award: [Sally Podoski](#)
- Hanns Kretzschmar Award for Excellence in the Arts: [Carolyn Ragusett](#)
- Daniel P. Spalding Volunteer Educator Award: [Marie Waddell](#)
- Janet Berry Volunteer of the Year: [Mary Downs](#)

Hillstrom, recipient of the Health Care Volunteer award, said in his acceptance speech that he took lemons — two battles with cancer — and made lemonade by leading a chapter of Us TOO, an international cancer support group.

"Every day I give thanks for the abilities I have and the continued desire to use them, to find it difficult to say no even though what I'm being asked to do is out of my comfort zone, to not be afraid to lead and to take something as difficult as having cancer twice and using that experience to allow me to have the confidence and compassion needed to lead the support group."

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