



News Release

Release Date: January 19, 2023

Media Contact:

Esther Fifelski

o (616) 355-1322

e.fifelski@cityofholland.com

2022 SOCIAL JUSTICE AWARD RECIPIENTS ANNOUNCED

HOLLAND, MICHIGAN –The Holland Human Relations Commission (HRC) presented the 2022 Social Justice Awards and the 2022 Youth Social Justice Award at City Hall on Wednesday, January 18th; a recording of the awards is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUXfJEJ5YDU>. The annual awards recognize individuals and organizations who exemplify the virtues of social justice by promoting equal opportunity and equal access for residents of Holland.

Michelle Slikkers, chair of the Human Relations Commission, said “As the City’s Human Relations Commission, we want to celebrate the work of individuals and organizations that address inequity in our community. Our goal is to not just promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in our community; but be an active collaborator with our partners in creating a community where all belong.”

The 2022 Social Justice Award recipients are:

EDUCATION: **I Am Academy** for helping dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline systems within educational institutions through mentorships with students and community partnerships. By partnering with area schools, I AM Academy empowers African American adolescents and young adults to achieve their full potential by centering their identity, cultivating relationships, supporting educational success, providing college experiences, and facilitating job readiness; ultimately changing the narrative and trajectory of their community.

HOUSING **Heights of Hope** is a community development organization that focuses on the "Holland Heights" area of Holland, specifically the Stratford Way and Abbey Court neighborhood, home to an extremely diverse population with a variety of talents, strengths, challenges, and needs. Heights of Hope is dedicated to the mission of affordable housing, recognizing that rent increases have a dramatic impact on nearly every aspect of residents' lives, including food security. With that mission in mind, Heights of Hope recently bought a six-plex apartment building on Abbey Court, providing six safe and affordable living units that cannot be controlled by landlords who renovate and then increase rents dramatically.

GOVERNMENT/COMMUNITY RELATIONS: **Ottawa County Office of Public Defender** for serving impoverished individuals and people of color who are disproportionately represented as defendants in the criminal justice system and for hosting two free expungement clinics in 2022 that assisted more than 160 individuals in Ottawa County to have very old criminal convictions set aside and erased from their records. These convictions present barriers to employment and licensing for disadvantaged individuals and people of color. Erasing the convictions from their

records allows them to become more productive members of our community and achieve their full potential.

HEALTH SERVICES: the **Miles of Smiles** mobile dental unit run by the Ottawa County Department of Public Health provides on-site preventive and restorative dental services for financially qualifying uninsured, and Medicaid insured Ottawa County residents. Services are provided at schools, migrant camps, Head Start Centers, and Ottawa County Department of Public Health clinics via a 40-foot mobile unit equipped with a waiting area, laboratory, two operatories, digital x-ray and a wheelchair lift. A volunteer network of more than 100 dentists, hygienists, and Grand Rapids Community College dental hygiene students work as dental healthcare providers. Through Miles of Smiles, kids can get quality dental care right at school so that they don't miss school days and the families can depend on good and safe care without having to miss work.

YOUTH SOCIAL JUSTICE AWARD: **Greta Traver**. The Holland Youth Advisory Core Council has named Greta Traver the Youth Social Justice Award winner for 2022. Traver is an advocate for bilingual tutoring and for calling out racism and homophobia. She helped found a bilingual tutoring program to assist students who struggle with the English language at the north branch of Herrick Library. Being tutored in their native tongue helps ESL students learn quicker and achieve more. In addition, Traver stood up to fellow boat racing competitors in addressing their racist and homophobic comments to other teams during a sporting event. An investigation ensued and her actions led to a new policy to prevent further behavior like this.

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD: **Ann Weller** for her countless hours of volunteerism, personal sacrifices, and displays of exceptional community spirit in her work over the past 21 years. Weller is a founding member of the Alliance for Cultural and Ethnic Harmony, started in 1999 in response to a racial catastrophe in Ottawa County, and has continued to serve as a board member providing the City of Holland with exceptional counsel and education in the areas of social justice, academic growth, microaggressions, diversity, equity, inclusion, and equality. Through her serving as editor of ACEH's weekly and monthly newsletter, Ann has been a foundational supporter of Out on The Lakeshore, First United Methodist Church of Holland, LAUP, I Am Academy, Holland Openly Secular Alliance, and many other organizations. With a distribution of more than 1,400, the ACEH In the News is a must-read for anyone supporting social justice and equal opportunities in Holland.

Weller has earned a reputation for being a conscientious and effective advocate for those ensnared in systemic oppression. Her commitment to equity, peace, and justice has helped to protect the Greater Holland BIPOC community, children, consumers, the least fortunate, the older adult population, and other historically marginalized communities.

In accepting her award, Weller said, "I grew up in the South when everything was segregated, legally and in practice. And even as a kid I knew this was not the way to live. So, throughout my life, before I moved here and since I moved here, if there are issues of peace and justice, if there are issues of gender equality, if there are issues of who can belong and who can't belong, I will never be a bystander."

For more information about the exemplary efforts of these award recipients, visit socialjusticeawards.cityofholland.com.

About the Social Justice Awards:

Each year, the Human Relations Commission recognizes individuals and organizations who exemplify the virtues of social justice by promoting equal opportunity and equal access for residents of Holland. The Social Justice Awards are always presented the week of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day recognizing Dr. King's dedicated work to social justice to improve the quality of life for everyone. The Holland Youth Advisory Council also selects and awards the Youth Social Justice Award recipient. View a list of past Social Justice Award recipients at socialjusticeawards.cityofholland.com.

About the Human Relations Commission:

The Holland Human Relations Commission exists to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in housing, education, employment and public service. The Commission advocates for all citizens, with special care to under-served communities. It does this through research, advocacy, education, mediation, and empowerment. Commissioners are appointed by the City mayor and serve 3-year terms. Learn more at humanrelations.cityofholland.com.

#