



**Christina Larson – Mattie Kelley
Cultural Arts Inductee**

Christina Larson has spent more than fifty years weaving emergency service, advocacy, and the arts together in Okaloosa County. As the county's first female paramedic, she earned its first paramedic degree from then-Okaloosa Walton Junior College and worked grueling 24-on/24-off shifts for six years before an injury led her to coordinate care for the Center for Independent Living, where she later founded Paddle Power, an annual accessible beach outing for residents with disabilities. Holding two psychology degrees from the University of West Florida, she taught there as an adjunct instructor. For twelve years, Christina fostered 145 special-needs children and founded the county's Foster Parent Association. Amid this service, she assisted Mattie Kelly in establishing the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation and, with her husband Robert, created Shoal Sanctuary Nature Preserve, a retreat pairing sculpture trails with environmental education. Christina is also a published, award-winning author and poet, whose memoir *Rosemary, Now and Then* earned national literary honors and reflects a rare fusion of science, service, and art.



2026 Hall of Fame Inductees

Christina Larson

Mattie Kelley Cultural Arts
Inductee

Dr. MiChele Stevenson

Military Inductee

Vanessa D'Aquin

Carolyn Spencer Humanitarian
Inductee

Dr. Linda Smith

Education Inductee

Heather Ruiz

Contemporary Inductee

Megan Blacho

Business-Professional Inductee

Dr. Cristie Kedroski

Community Service Inductee

Simona Faroni

Pioneer Inductee



**Dr. MiChele Stevenson –
Military Inductee**

Dr. MiChele Stevenson has built a distinguished federal career supporting our nation's defense while giving back to the Okaloosa County community that shaped her. A product of Okaloosa County schools who earned her Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of West Florida and a Doctorate from Virginia University of Lynchburg, she served in acquisition and equal opportunity roles with Naval Strategic Systems Programs, Naval Facilities Engineering Command, and the Assistant Secretary of the Navy before joining the Defense Threat Reduction Agency, where she now leads the Mentor Protégé Program supporting small businesses in defense contracting. A graduate of the Department of War's Women's Executive Leadership Program, she has chaired DTRA's Women's Employee Resource Group and Diversity and Inclusion Council. Back home, MiChele partnered with Fort Walton Beach to restore the historic NAACP Legacy Walk of Fame honoring her own parents, and serves on the Homelessness and Housing Alliance's Grants Review Committee, helping direct funding toward residents facing housing instability, continuing her family's legacy through Gregg Chapel AME Church.



**Vanessa D'Aquin - Carolyn Spencer
Humanitarian Inductee**



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**Dr. Linda Smith –
Education Inductee**

Dr. Linda Smith has devoted her life to Okaloosa County's children, first as a classroom teacher and then as a middle and high school principal, building school cultures grounded in accountability, empathy, and high expectations. A resident of the county since 1961, she carried that devotion into a second career fourteen years ago as a Guardian ad Litem, where she now serves as a Certified Child Advocate Manager overseeing more than twenty-five volunteers with one of the highest retention rates in the First Judicial Circuit. Judges regularly seek her expertise navigating IEPs and 504 plans for children in protective custody, and she has guided countless students who once believed education held no value toward graduation or a GED. Beyond her caseload, Linda mobilizes churches and civic groups to provide clothing and comfort items to children entering care with nothing. A devoted member of Delta Kappa Gamma and her church choir, she leads with quiet persistence, refusing to give up on any child, shaping generations of Okaloosa County families.



**Heather Ruiz –
Contemporary Inductee**

Heather Ruiz has spent the last decade at the center of Okaloosa County's most transformative decisions. A self-described "military brat" who graduated from Niceville High School and earned her marketing degree from Florida State University, Heather built her career as a single mother, rising from media sales into digital marketing, commercial real estate, and national marketing leadership. Over nearly a decade at Destin Commons, she earned four promotions and national recognition for community impact, including Hurricane Michael relief efforts. In 2021, she became Director of Marketing for both Talking Parents and Bit-Wizards, leading national strategy for two companies at once. That same year, Heather became one of the youngest women ever to chair the eighty-year-old Fort Walton Beach Chamber, steering initiatives including local sales tax measures and the Brooks Bridge replacement. She serves on the Mattie Kelly Arts Foundation board, mentors young women through Take Stock in Children, and was inducted into the Commission's Women of Honor in 2021, all while raising two children with her husband, Dennis.



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**Megan Blanco – Business-Professional
Inductee**

Megan Blanco arrived in Okaloosa County with a law degree earned Magna Cum Laude from the University of Akron and a career already forged through prosecutorial work in Florida and Virginia. She opened her own practice, building it into a statewide authority on healthcare license defense and representing thousands of nurses and other medical professionals across Florida. Despite carrying the full weight of running her own office, Megan has consistently made time to mentor other women launching their own practices, offering guidance, encouragement, and even financial support. She co-founded the Okaloosa Chapter of the Florida Association for Women Lawyers, growing it into a lasting professional home for women attorneys, and was honored with the Leader in the Law Award at the 2026 FAWL State Convention. Appointed by the Chief Judge to the First Judicial Circuit's Professionalism Panel, Megan has climbed to the top of a specialized legal field through her own tenacity while lifting other women alongside her, exemplifying the vision and leadership that define OCCSW's Professional Business Leader inductees.



Dr. Cristie Kedroski – Community Service Inductee

Dr. Cristie Kedroski has spent more than fifteen years shaping Northwest Florida State College and strengthening the Okaloosa County community around it. A native of Okaloosa County and University of Florida graduate, she returned home to lead the NWFSC Foundation, growing its endowment from \$36 million to more than \$62 million while overseeing nearly \$75 million in grant funding for workforce and nursing programs. In 2024, she stepped in as Interim President, guiding the College through a national leadership search with a steady hand. Beyond campus, Cristie devotes her leadership to the wider community, serving on the boards of HCA Florida Fort Walton-Destin Hospital and CCB Community Bank, and chairing the Niceville-Valparaiso Chamber of Commerce, where she has championed initiatives supporting local military families and public education. A 2005 Leadership Okaloosa graduate and former Hurlburt Field Honorary Commander, she has spent decades connecting education, healthcare, and business leaders toward shared community goals, always quick to credit the teams around her for the College's growth..



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Simona Faroni – Pioneer Inductee

Simona Faroni arrived in Okaloosa County from Mantova, Italy, in 1996 with no English, no credit history, and a dream of bringing authentic Italian gelato to America. Facing regulatory hurdles that nearly ended the venture, she and her husband Guido spent their days bringing imported equipment into FDA compliance and their nights learning English, becoming the first in their industry certified to import Italian gelato equipment. Simona sold gelato door to door to keep the dream alive. That resilience grew GS Gelato into a nationally distributed manufacturer employing more than 150 people who speak ten languages, with \$38 million in 2025 sales. Naturalized as a U.S. citizen in 2010, Simona has sponsored international workers toward citizenship, mentored entrepreneurs through Grow Florida, and given generously to the Okaloosa County Sheriff's Office, local schools, and the Boys and Girls Club. Her honors include Enterprising Women of the Year and multiple Inc. 5000 recognitions. Simona's story is a living testament to the American Dream, built through grit and generosity.



Stacey Darhower
Contemporary Inductee

Stacey Darhower graduated from Niceville High School, and went on to get her bachelor's degree from UWF in Legal Administration and later her Masters in Acquisition Management. She excelled in leadership and acquisitions becoming the first woman GS-15, Chief of Contracting at AFRL Munitions Directorate, and now is Director of Contracting for Air Force Test Center Eglin AFB with a \$9B portfolio. She received the prestigious Meritorious Civilian Service Medal, one of only 6 women that holds this honor, and the David Packard Excellence in Acquisition Award. Her dedication led to 824 contracts to local businesses resulting in mutual growth on base and Okaloosa County's economy, while increasing her civilian positions at Eglin by 33%. Her innovative agreements increased STEM at Doolittle Institute, Emerald Coast Science Center, Okaloosa Schools and the HSU Foundation. She mentors women in contracting and volunteers with local athletics, and community partnership initiatives. Her distinguished career leaves a legacy at DOD and Okaloosa County.



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Professional Leader Inductee

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Contemporary Inductee

Gloria Frazier

Business Leader Inductee

Delores Noechel

Education Inductee

Julie Porterfield

Carolyn Spencer Humanitarian Inductee

Col. Jocelyn Schermerhorn

Military Inductee

Sybil Smith Lebherz

Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Inductee

Cissy Wyninegar

Pioneer Inductee



Gloria Frazier
Business Leader Inductee

Gloria Frazier has been the broker of ERA American Real Estate since 1981, when she founded the company. She plans and oversees the staff of 110 agents, 34 employees, and they manage 1,000 properties. Gloria has been actively involved with the Emerald Coast Association of Realtors, MLS Corporation, all area Chambers of Commerce, One Okaloosa (formerly the Economic Development Council) and the Building Industry Association.

There is a long list of non-profits where she has served on the board and as president. She was the 1992 Queen of Hearts for AMA and sponsors a NWFSC scholarship and endowment. "Gloria is the one who desires to make a positive difference in the lives of our Okaloosa County constituents," said Devin Stephenson, NWFSC President. "She is a humble, loving and caring individual who desires to see others succeed. Gloria is a giver and there are no greater givers than those who give of themselves."



Dolores Noechel
Education Inductee

Dolores Noechel's parents instilled in her the love of education and the importance of community involvement. Her father, John Shortall, was the Mayor of Fort Walton Beach and her mother, Valerie Shortall, owned Valerie's of Fort Walton Beach. Dolores was a math teacher at Ruckel Middle School, where she was the Teacher of the Year twice and a finalist for Okaloosa County's Teacher of the Year. Other awards include: 7 time Statewide Winner of the Florida Stock Market Simulation, First Place Winner in the National Middle School Association Team Teaching Awards and Florida Stock Market Game's Distinguished Advisor of the Year. Dolores became the District Instructional Technology and Media Services Specialist and later the Assistant Principal at Fort Walton Beach High School. Her community involvement includes: Okaloosa County Public Schools Foundation Board Member, Leadership Council Member for Take Stock in Children and mentor for 12 years, P.E.O., A.D.K., St. Mary's Council of Catholic Women, Impact 100 Education Committee Co-Chair, Board Member for Center for Lifelong Learning and Teacher Education Adjunct for Northwest Florida State College.



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Julie Porterfield
Carolyn Spencer Humanitarian Inductee

Julie Porterfield has a limitless heart when it comes to serving the welfare of our most vulnerable children in our community. After earning her bachelor's and master's degree from the University of West Florida, she worked with the State's Attorney's office for 17 years as a victim advocate and administrator. In 1999, she became the founding CEO of the Emerald Coast Children's Advocacy Center (ECCAC). The ECCAC provides services at no cost for young victims of abuse, neglect, or abandonment plus they provide mental health therapy for these children, as well as their families. They also offer Safety Matters & Teen Safety Matters, crucial preventive programs in our area schools. Julie has served as the president of the board of directors of the Florida Network of 17 Children's Advocacy Centers throughout Florida and volunteered as a board member on local, state, and national levels with the National Children's Alliance, Florida's Governor Council for Prevention and Permanency, and Shelter House. Her commitment to our community is to work towards an end to child abuse and neglect, while protecting children by restoring the lives and futures of these young victims in our area.



Col. Jocelyn Schermerhorn
Military Inductee

Colonel Jocelyn Schermerhorn is currently the Air Force Special Operations Command Director of Operations. She is responsible for implementing and directing operational command policy for AFSOC's worldwide special operations units including more than 20,000 personnel, approximately 300 aircraft and \$17 billion in assets. Colonel Schermerhorn entered the Air Force in 1995 as a distinguished graduate of the Reserve Officer Training Corps program at Colorado State University where she earned a Bachelor of Science degree in civil engineering. She earned her wings as a distinguished graduate of navigator training at Randolph Air Force Base, Texas, and holds Master of Business Administration and Master of Strategic Studies degrees. She has served as an evaluator navigator in the C-130E and MC-130H, a U-28A combat systems officer and has commanded at various levels. Colonel Schermerhorn has called Okaloosa County home since her first assignment here in 2003 and is proud to have served as commander of the 1st Special Operations Wing and installation commander for Hurlburt Field from June 2020-June 2022.



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Sybil Smith Lebherz-Posthumous
Mattie Kelly Cultural Arts Inductee

Sybil Smith Lebherz was a long-time resident of Mary Esther. She made numerous, significant donations behind the scenes including: Scholarships helping students attend her alma mater of Huntingdon College in Montgomery, supporting local dancers in acquiring additional professional training and efforts to address the needs of homeless women with children. Before she established a charitable trust, known as the Sybil Smith Foundation, her generosity extended to many early local projects for youth, including the Fort Walton Beach YMCA, Florida Sheriff's Youth Fund, the Fort Walton Beach Ballet Association (now Northwest Florida Ballet) and Mary Esther United Methodist Church. Her name can be found on numerous facilities that she helped to fund and programs that continue to have an active impact today, including: The Sybil Smith Lebherz Center for Dance Education at the Northwest Florida Ballet, the renovations done on the Greater Fort Walton Beach Chamber of Commerce building and the Sybil Smith Lebherz Aquatic Center, the original pool at the Fort Walton Beach YMCA. Her impact and legacy in Okaloosa County lives on today through grants from the Sybil Smith Foundation.



Cissy Wyninegar
Pioneer Inductee

Catherine “Cissy” Wyninegar grew up in Fort Walton Beach, the child of the Bass, Staff, and Gerlach pioneer families. Cissy served on the Fort Walton Beach City Council and became a certified Florida Supreme Court Mediator to aid local residents. She was the principal of St. Mary’s and Assistant Principal of Pryor Middle School. Cissy joined Fort Walton Beach Woman’s Club, founded by her great-aunts, where she served as President for two terms. During her time as President, she coordinated the Bud and Dorie Day Patriot Trail, a walking trail and family park at Ferry Park. She led and conceived the idea for “Safe, Secure, Successful”, which aids homeless children in 9 schools by partnering with Goodwill, American Legion Post 235 Riders, and the Elks Lodge 1795. Under her leadership, the “Home of the Brave” wall was dedicated to honoring fallen military students from Choctawhatchee High School. To preserve local history, the Gulfview Hotel was donated and moved from Staff property to become the Fort Walton Beach Welcome Center in Downtown Fort Walton Beach. Cissy was raised to think of others first. Her pioneer ancestors saw the need to improve and build and Cissy has continued that pioneer spirit in a modern time, uplifting and improving her hometown and county. Her pioneer spirit shines in all she does.



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