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## **VEA Awards Honor Late Sen. John Miller, Outstanding Educators**

ROANOKE—When State Sen. John Miller passed away last year, still at the pinnacle of his legislative career, his hometown newspaper in Newport News called him a “stalwart for public education.” Public schools were, indeed, the focus of his time in the General Assembly, beginning with his election to the Senate in 2007 and two subsequent re-elections.

In recognition of that longstanding support for public education, Sen. Miller is the 2017 recipient of VEA’s **Friend of Education Award**, the highest honor the Association bestows.

Immediately upon his election, Sen. Miller invited local educators to a breakfast meeting to hear their thoughts on what public education needed most, launching what Newport News Education Association President Dan McFarland calls a “10-year relationship of honing ideas and legislation—he was very effective at working ‘across the aisle’ on education legislation.”

He worked on behalf of students and educators right up until his passing, which occurred just after he had successfully convinced fellow legislators to pass sweeping reforms for Virginia’s high schools.

Sen. Miller’s wife, Sharron, accepted the award during a dinner held here March 31 at the Association’s annual convention as part of VEA’s recognition of individuals and organizations that have done great work in and for public schools.

*Here’s a rundown of the VEA’s 2017 award recipients:*

**Award for Teaching Excellence. Afreen Gootee**, who teaches at an alternative high school in Hanover County, is the 2017 winner of this award. She turns her classroom into a restaurant so students can learn math concepts like calculating percentages for taxes and tips, teaches art by having students create ceiling tiles, and helps prepare them for real life by using spreadsheets to create budgets.

Because some of her students have had negative interactions with local government, she has them debate laws, hold mock elections and travel to the General Assembly.

And Gootee does it all with great kindness. In the words of one former student, “One of my most memorable recollections is how much love she has for all her students. Her door was always open and she always greeted each student with a giant smile I can still see every time I think of her.”

Gootee will receive a plaque and a cash award of \$500 and compete, as Virginia's nominee, for the NEA Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence and its \$25,000 prize.

**Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year. Christine Heilig**, a special education paraprofessional at Blacksburg Middle School in Montgomery County is the 2017 ESP of the Year. She serves as an Association building representative at BMS and has traveled to Richmond to represent local educators on VEA's annual Lobby Day. In her community, she's active in the Christiansburg Ruritan Club, reaching out to care for the elderly, veterans, and those in need. She's also part of Help Save the Next Girl, a national organization that works to protect youth from predatory violence, and she meets monthly with a diversity group to explore issues of prejudice and privilege.

**Robley S. Jones Political Activist Award.** This brand-new honor is named for VEA's longtime Director of Government Relations and former Association president, and honors individuals for their contributions to education legislation or policy, or to the election of public education-friendly candidates.

There are two winners of the inaugural Jones Award: **Erin Bull** of the Montgomery County Education Association for her tireless efforts in the legislative and fundraising arenas; and three members of the Prince William Education Association for their months of pre-election neighborhood canvassing. They are **Daniel Foose, David Martin** and **Chuck Ronco**.

**Fitz Turner Award for Outstanding Contributions in Intergroup Relations.** This award is named for the former president of the predominantly black Virginia Teachers Association, which merged with VEA in 1967. It honors an individual or organization that's contributed to the enhancement of human and civil rights in Virginia.

This year's winner is **Beblon Parks**, the now-retired Director of VEA's Office of Field Services, Organizing and Minority Engagement. She stepped down in 2014 after a career that included classroom teaching, serving as a local association officer, and overseeing a VEA field office in the Tidewater area.

**VEA-Retired Distinguished Service Award.** This salutes a retired educator who has made significant contributions to the growth of the active and retired Association, the promotion of public education, and the welfare of public educators.

**Edith Good** was an active member and former president of the Rockingham County Education Association during an outstanding career as both a high school and an elementary school teacher. After retiring in 1991, she was the primary organizer of the Valley Association of Retired Educators, and has continued to serve the Association and public education as a member of statewide committees, as a convention delegate, in Read Across America activities, and as a volunteer in her local schools.

A 2017 Political Activism Award was presented to the **Amherst Education Association** in honor of its committed efforts to change the county school board to an elected body, and the **Prince William Education Association** received a 2016 Community Service Award for its work to help flood victims in West Virginia.