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For immediate release: March 19, 2021

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Delegate Guzman, Outstanding Educators Honored with 2021 VEA Awards

RICHMOND—An innovative legislator from Northern Virginia, a Prince William social studies teacher, and a Frederick County school bus driver head the list of winners of 2021 awards from the Virginia Education Association, all singled out for recognition of their outstanding work in and for public education. They and other honorees were scheduled to receive their awards at the VEA convention in Richmond this month, but will now either have individual ceremonies later or accept by video as the convention is being held virtually.

Here's a rundown of this year's award recipients:

Friend of Education Award. This is VEA's highest honor, and it's not presented every year. "However," says VEA President Dr. James J. Fedderman, "**Delegate Elizabeth Guzman** clearly earned it in 2021. She led the charge in the General Assembly to restore collective bargaining rights for our state's public educators, who had worked without those rights for 40 years, and she's been an outstanding advocate for public education and for educators."

Guzman, who represents House District 31 (parts of the counties of both Prince William and Fauquier), is a social worker who has spent her career protecting children from abuse, helping adults with substance abuse disorders, and working in Head Start. Today, she oversees a budget of more than \$20 million for the City of Alexandria's Department of Adult Services.

In addition to her critical leadership on collective bargaining, Guzman has used her time in the General Assembly to push for reduced caseloads for school counselors, universal pre-kindergarten, increased pay for educators, and additional resources for children with learning disabilities.

Award for Teaching Excellence. This isn't the first time **Erin Merrill**, a middle school social studies teacher in **Prince William County**, has been honored for her teaching skills. In 2020, she was one of three national recipients of the American Civic Education Teacher Award from the Center for Civic Education and in 2019, she was the Virginia Middle School Association's Teacher of the Year. She's known, among other things, for the innovative ways she uses technology in the classroom, her passion for her subject, how her students track elections and legislation and then propose their own laws, and the way she cares deeply for the young people in her charge.

“Her classroom is one that every student likes to be in,” wrote one former student, now a high school senior, in support of Merrill’s nomination for this award. “She makes everyone feel like we belong. She always modeled the behavior she expected from us. We were a community and to this day I’m still best friends with the students I was with in those grades.”

“A true educator is continuously learning and growing, and every year I try to add at least one innovation to my classroom,” Erin says “but I believe the most important way I’ve grown has been to listen to my students. It’s terrifying to give your students a forum for honest and anonymous feedback every year, but I do so in the hopes that I’ll learn what I’m doing well, what I overlook, and how I can keep improving.”

Education Support Professional (ESP) of the Year. **Brandi Wilder** is a school bus driver in **Frederick County**, where she’s paired older and younger students for Story Time on the Bus to build community and reinforce academic skills. She’s also very politically active, helping interview local candidates for her union’s Political Action Committee for Education and representing member concerns at school board and board of supervisor meetings. In addition, she co-chairs FCEA’s Education Support Professionals Committee and is one of eight county school employees appointed to a committee by the superintendent to share concerns and solutions with administration.

“She is a role model of involvement, leadership, and compassion,” says FCEA President Shaniqua Williams. “She safely transports students, organizes and provides holiday meals and gifts for families in need, helps distribute food for our students during the pandemic, and organizes networking events for her fellow ESPs.”

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.

The **Fairfax Education Association** is this year’s honoree for responding to a request from an FEA member to organize an “Educators for Black Lives Matter” rally event. Amidst a pandemic, the event had to be done virtually, but was still attended by more than 500 people, who heard from speakers who included student activists, educators, policymakers, union leaders, and community allies. The rally wrapped up with participants holding signs and maintaining silence for 8 minutes and 48 seconds to honor George Floyd and all victims of police violence.

Robley S. Jones Political Activist Award. This honor, in only its fifth year, is named for VEA’s retired 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.

Kimberly Adams, president of the **Fairfax** Education Association and a school librarian, works consistently to elect friends of public education to office, from her local school board to the White House. She’s served as an Educator for Joe, delegate to the Democratic National Convention, and in numerous state and local campaigns, as well as lobbying regularly in Virginia’s General Assembly.

Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award. Saluting 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, this award is named after one of the founding members of VEA-Retired.

Sara Jane Knight of **Arlington** and **Lola V. McDowell** of **Richmond** are this year's co-winners. A quarter-century ago, **Knight** was one of the founding members of the Arlington Education Association-Retired and has been a consistent leader since, currently serving as recording secretary. In addition to being a longtime lobbyist on education issues, she's helped coordinate a grant program for educators with the Arlington Community Foundation. In retirement, **McDowell** has become Richmond's Read Across America celebration leader, holding annual events that have drawn governors, legislators, mayors, superintendents, first responders, local television figures, community leaders, and many others. She's also a recruiter for the Richmond Education Association and has helped city schools find retired teachers to serve as mentors to new educators.

A+ Awards for Membership Growth. VEA also honored four local affiliates for outstanding membership growth in 2020. Winning Gold Awards were the **Stafford Education Association** and the **Chesterfield/Colonial Heights UniServ Council**; a Silver Award went to the **Loudoun UniServ Council**; and the **Mountain View UniServ Council** earned a Bronze Award.

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