

Fall 2025

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Connections

A Publication of VEA-Retired



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President's Column

By Lola V. McDowell

Happy Fall, VEA-Retired! With the new school and association years, I offer a special welcome to our newest members who may be receiving this newsletter for the first time. Congratulations and welcome to retirement! You'll love it here!

Summer went by too fast as usual, but a highlight for me was attending the NEA Retired Annual Meeting (RAM) along with fellow elected delegates Eddie Fifer, Meg Gruber, Vashti Mallory, and Dot Walton. RAM was held in Portland, Oregon on June 29th and 30th.

Our delegation was elated when it was announced that our own Shirley George had been selected as the recipient of the 2025 NEA-Retired Distinguished Service Award, the highest honor for an NEA-Retired member. Thanks to some behind-the-scenes assistance from her son, Shirley was able to attend the award presentation via Zoom. She was completely unaware in advance of what was about to happen (as were we) and was equally surprised when her name was announced. It was such a thrill for us all! Earlier this year, Shirley received the VEA-Retired Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award and thus became Virginia's nominee for the NEA award. See page 3 for more about Shirley.

Following the RAM, the VEA-Retired delegation remained in Portland for another week to attend the NEA Representative Assembly (RA) where over 70 new business items (NBIs) were discussed and debated. Of note, NBI 9 was adopted to create a committee to explore naming the American Teachers Association (ATA) as a Legacy Organization of the NEA. Former NEA President Reg Weaver made an appearance to signify the importance of passing this NBI.

And, finally, the Virginia delegation was excited to be present when former VEA President and current NEA Vice President Princess Moss announced her candidacy for NEA President. Be sure to visit page 4 to see some of the sights from RAM and RA in Portland.

If you think this sounds like fun and you'd like to run for a delegate seat to the NEA and/or VEA conventions or a seat on the VEA-Retired Council, you're in luck because elections are coming up in January! Completed candidate paperwork is due by December 15th. More information can be found on page 5. We look forward to having you join us!

2025-26 VEA-Retired Council

Lola McDowell
President

Malia Huddle
Vice President

Kathy Davis
Secretary-Treasurer

Dot Walton
*Retired Member at Large,
VEA Board*

Dennis Pfennig
Immediate Past President

*Congressional District
Representatives:*

Meg Gruber, 1st

Sid Neighbours, 2nd

Angela Peterson, 3rd

Stella Little Johnson, 4th

Barb Wilson, 5th

Nena Koch, 6th

Jamila Darwish, 7th

Vacant, 8th

Eddie Fifer, 9th

Cindy Kennedy, 10th

Allison Batty, 11th

Connections

Martha Wood: Trailblazer, Mentor, Friend

By Barbara Wilson

Martha Wood, beloved VEA icon who was one of the founders of VEA-Retired and served as its first president, passed away in August.

Martha had a heart for service and a passion for travel. She was tireless in her advocacy and support for educators and was known statewide for encouraging active members to become pre-retired subscribers.



Martha with Princess Moss

Martha also played a significant role mentoring Princess Moss on the local and state levels and was the instigator of the great “Chex Mix” campaign used when Princess ran for NEA Board of Directors. Martha persuaded educators from all over the state to prepare Chex Mix and several associations came together in home economics kitchens to make the mix. Under Martha’s direction, associations descended upon the VEA convention in Richmond with numerous varieties of Chex Mix, and several bags were given to all attendees.

Martha genuinely cared for others and inspired many to belong to VEA and to advocate for children and public education. She is survived by her daughter Elizabeth, sister Lilchy Huffman, five grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. At Martha’s service, Elizabeth thanked the many VEA and NEA members in attendance for their love for her mother.



Martha Wood with VEA-Retired delegates, VEA and NEA leaders at the 2025 VEA Delegate Assembly in Abingdon

NEA Retired Distinguished Service Awardee: **Shirley George**



“I was always one of those high school students who had to get involved in things...I was nosy, so what better way than to get involved.”

These were the words of Shirley George, 30 years ago, as she took the reins as president of the Education Association of Norfolk. Since that time, her passion for standing up for students and serving her state and national associations has never waned.

For her decades of service and selfless dedication, Shirley received NEA-Retired's highest honor, the Distinguished Service Award, which was presented at the NEA Retired Annual Meeting this summer.

Shirley George

As a special education teacher, Shirley recognized the importance of every ESP, from her aides to those who drove her students to school. Connie Coates, an ESP whom Shirley mentored, says Shirley encouraged her to run for president of her local association, which led to additional leadership roles with the Virginia Education Association (VEA) and eventually a seat on the VEA-Retired Council.

Over the years, Shirley has held many leadership roles with her local, as well as with VEA, VEA-Retired, and NEA. She has also been an avid PAC fundraiser and membership recruiter.

Former VEA Vice President Jeff Cobb recalls how Shirley was a “positive and vital force” for retirees in Virginia Beach, especially. As a Uniserv Director, and later as a retiree, she lobbied the state's General Assembly relentlessly. Her advocacy focused on retiree pensions, equity in insurance reimbursements for retired ESPs, and issues affecting the lives of active members.

In support of the nomination, VEA-Retired President Lola McDowell wrote: “Shirley is a truly exceptional member and advocate who has dedicated her life to the support of public education in so many ways!”

Nominations Open for 2026 Distinguished Service Award

By Kathy Davis

VEA-Retired is seeking nominations for the 2026 Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award. This annual award is meant to recognize retired members who have made significant contributions to the growth of the active and retired Association, the promotion of public education, and the welfare of public educators since retirement. The recipient will be Virginia's nominee for the NEA Retired award.

Nominees must have been NEA/VEA-Retired members for at least five consecutive years as of January 15th of the award year and cannot hold a position on the VEA-Retired Council at the time of nomination. Additional information is available at vea.link/distinguished-service. Please contact us at vearetired@veanea.org with questions. Nominations are due by January 7, 2026. The award will be presented at the 2026 VEA Delegate Assembly to be held April 16-18 in Norfolk.

NEA Retired Annual Meeting (RAM) and NEA RA Highlights

By Meg Gruber



Mount Hood

Five VEA-Retired delegates (Eddie Fifer, Meg Gruber, Vashti Mallory, Lola McDowell, and Dot Walton) attended the NEA RA and RAM, which were held in Portland, OR this year. During the RAM, Marilyn Warner (FL) was elected as the next vice president. Tori Smith (GA) and Meg Gruber were elected to 3-year terms on the executive council and Brent McKim (KY) was elected to a 1-year term to finish out the term of the late Tom Wellman.

During these events, it's always wonderful to see our retired leaders such as Reg Weaver. One of the biggest highlights was when NEA VP Princess Moss declared that she is running for NEA president. We are all behind her. "Brave women didn't kill dragons. The brave women rode them."



Lola McDowell, Reg Weaver



Vashti Mallory, Eddie Fifer, Dot Walton, Lola McDowell



The Virginia delegation is (literally) behind Princess Moss for NEA President!



NEA VP Princess Moss



Clesta Floor, Meg Gruber, Dot Walton



Lola McDowell, Princess Moss, Carol Bauer

2026 VEA-Retired Elections Coming in January

By Meg Gruber

VEA-Retired elections will take place in January 2026. All elected officers and council positions will be for two-year terms beginning August 1, 2026, and ending July 31, 2028.

If you've ever wanted to get involved, this is your chance! We will be electing all positions on the VEA-Retired Council, as well as retired delegates to the VEA and NEA conventions. Retired delegates will also serve TWO-YEAR terms, so delegates elected in January 2026 will be attending both the 2026 and 2027 conventions. Additional information, including timelines, petitions for council seats, and self-nomination forms for retired delegate seats, are available at vea.link/retired-elections.

All petitions and self-nomination forms are due postmarked or hand-delivered to VEA by the close of business on December 15, 2025. Elections will be held January 21-23, 2026, via electronic ballot. (Be sure we have your email address; we'll send a reminder via email when the ballot opens. If you received this newsletter via email, then you're all set.) Voters who do not have access to a computer/email may go to a library or other location that has public Internet availability. Paper ballots may be requested by January 2nd and must be completed and returned/postmarked by January 20th to be counted. Members who request paper ballots are removed from the online balloting system and are not eligible to vote electronically. Candidate paperwork postmarked, hand-delivered, or e-mailed after December 15, 2025, will not be accepted.

Have questions? Contact Meg Gruber, VEA-Retired Elections and Campaign Practices Chair, at vearetired@veanea.org.



Meg Gruber, Tori Smith, Marilyn Warner,
Brent McKim

NEA RAM and RA Portland, Oregon July 2025



Eddie Fifer, Dot Walton, Vashti Mallory,
Lola McDowell



NEA President Becky Pringle,
Earl Wiman,
NEA Secretary-Treasurer
Noel Candelaria,
Christine Mimi Clarke





About VEA-Retired

- We are the fastest growing division of VEA
- Council members are elected by VEA-Retired membership
- We elect our own delegates to the VEA and NEA assemblies
- We have active local chapters across the state
- VEA-Retired members are eligible for the same NEA Member Benefits they had while working
- Information is published in *Connections, Virginia Journal of Education*, and is available on the VEA website
- Contact us at vearetired@veanea.org for information on local chapters

Share your stories!

If you or your local retired chapter would like to have an article in the next issue of *Connections*, please forward it to vearetired@veanea.org by December 1, 2025.

A Tribute to Ralph Booher at VEA Convention

Given by Eddie Fifer at the 2025 VEA Delegate Assembly

Madam President,

I would like to take this opportunity to honor and remember one of our own who passed away this past November, Ralph Booher. If you may, I would like for everyone who knew Ralph to stand. Now, everyone who has received one or more of Ralph's fabulous hugs, raise your hand. Yes, Ralph was a big hugger.

Ralph was a dedicated teacher, an Association leader at all levels, and a dear friend. He served on the NEA Board of Directors, the VEA Board of Directors and Executive Committee multiple times, VEA-Retired Council, and served as local president right here in Washington County. He also received the VEA-Retired Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award two years ago.

Since the 60s, Ralph has been a delegate to the NEA Conventions and especially the VEA Conventions, where he traveled across the state to attend. He, along with many others, lobbied for decades to have the VEA convention here in Southwest Virginia. He was so proud when the VEA finally scheduled the convention in Abingdon.

Ralph was supposed to be a delegate here today. His body may not be here, but I know his spirit is.

Thank you for allowing me to honor and remember Ralph. I hope his love and respect for this Association is felt by everyone as we conduct our important business.

Madam President, I thank you again.



Ralph Booher



Debbie Jesse, Anna Booher, Princess Moss, Eddie Fifer, Ann Johnson

VEA-Retired Vision Committee Report

By Dot Walton

At the September 19, 2024, VEA-Retired Council meeting invited guests, VEA President Carol Bauer, VEA Interim Executive Director Dr. Earl Wiman, and NEA Director Christina Bohringer were asked how VEA-Retired could be more involved with VEA. Council members voiced concerns over the lack of retired members' involvement with VEA and NEA.

Dr. Wiman suggested that VEA-Retired think about what the relationship between VEA and VEA-Retired *should* look like and how VEA-Retired believes a real partnership could be achieved. He said that he and President Bauer would also work together on this issue. At the same meeting, a motion passed unanimously directing VEA-Retired President Lola McDowell to appoint an ad-hoc committee to develop a blueprint for this collaborative relationship from the VEA-Retired perspective.

The Vision Committee was established and had its first meeting on December 19, 2024. Committee members appointed were Dot Walton (elected as chair), Meg Gruber (volunteered to be secretary), Lola McDowell, Dr. Dennis Pfennig, Malia Huddle, Allison Batty, Eddie Fifer, and Nena Koch. The committee held three additional meetings with the following goals in mind:

- Conceptualize a partnership between VEA-Retired members and VEA leadership and UniServ.
- Envision a strong and mutually-beneficial collaboration between VEA and VEA-Retired.

The committee developed the following list of expectations and requests:

- The VEA president and the VEA-Retired president will work together to advocate for all members, active and retired.
- VEA leadership will encourage the locals and districts to invite VEA-Retired representatives to their meetings.
- The VEA Journal will include a regular VEA-Retired segment in the magazine. Providing content for this will require a commitment on VEA-Retired's part.
- The VEA president will acknowledge the importance of VEA's working relationship with VEA-Retired by recognizing the VEA-Retired president or designee when in attendance at conferences, events, and conventions. When in attendance on these occasions, the VEA-Retired president will be available to assist the VEA president, when requested.
- VEA will advocate for retiree representation on VEA committees, boards, and decision-making processes at the local and district levels
- VEA will provide wall space at VEA headquarters to display a plaque containing the names of recipients of the VEA-Retired Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award along with the plaque listing the names of past VEA-Retired presidents.

Continued on page 11

About the State

Elizabeth River Retired Educators

By Malia Huddle



Secretary/treasurer Jeff Cobb and Chair Malia Huddle presented Councilwoman Dr. Ella Ward, Chair of the Cornland School Foundation with a donation to the Historic Cornland School Foundation. ERRE members toured the school in June, learning about its history, and followed up in July with the donation in order to assist the foundation in its mission to preserve the school and tell its story. At our July meeting, we were joined by Chesapeake Education Association President Katelyn Ritenour so we could discuss opportunities and plan for ERRE members to support CEA at NTO and throughout the school year.

ERRE meets the second Thursday of each month at a local restaurant. We collect books and nonperishable food items at each meeting as part of our ongoing community outreach/service efforts. If you're in the area, come visit. Please contact Malia Huddle at vearetired@veanea.org for the location. We'd love to see you!

Fairfax Education Association - Retired

By Allison Batty

FEA-Retired held our annual member meeting and luncheon at the Elks Lodge in the spring. It was so nice seeing members in person. We had a robust meeting that included elections to the FEA-Retired Council. Congratulations to all elected Council members. The Council members are Allison Batty, President, David Thomas, VP, Cheryl Binkley, Mimi Dash, Marni Matyac, Joyce Matthews, Marlene Parker, Dennis Pfennig, Lynda Vincent, and Adrienne White.

Delegate Marcus Simon was the guest speaker. He is a supporter of the public schools and shared much information with us. Abigail Spanberger, candidate for Governor, sent us a lovely, personalized video.



FEA-Retired luncheon attendees with Delegate Simon



Delegate Marcus Simon

Richmond Education Association - Retired

By Vashti Mallory

REA-Retired ended the 2024-2025 year with its annual retirement luncheon, held on June 3 at Holy Rosary Catholic Church in Richmond. This event honors employees retiring from Richmond Public Schools who have been loyal members of REA during their careers. Our keynote speaker, Rev. Cheryl Ivy Green, executive assistant pastor of First Baptist Church of South Richmond gave a very inspirational retirement speech. We honored retirees from both 2023-24 and 2024-25, presenting each with a certificate of appreciation and a VEA-Retired lapel pin.

Our October meeting was held on October 8, 2025, at the REA office. Our special guests were Shane Riddle, director of VEA's office of government relations and research, and Divine Munyengeterwa, REA's UniServ director. In addition, we had an informative and empowering presentation on the latest information on breast cancer awareness, presented by Erin Steigleder, director of the Virginia Breast Cancer Foundation. This year, REA-Retired will be focused on growing membership and increasing member engagement. In our effort to achieve these goals we are planning an early bird sign-up initiative, a marketing media campaign, and several fun activities to spark members' interest.



Rev. Cheryl Ivy Green



REA-Retired luncheon attendees

VEA-Retired Membership Grants

Would you like to start a local or regional VEA-Retired chapter in your area? Your VEA-Retired Council would love to help you! We'll even provide up to \$500 to help you get started. We've created a starter kit with sample bylaws, ideas, and instructions to make it as easy as possible. We'll assign a couple members of the Council to serve as mentors to help you along the way.

Contact us as vearetired@veanea.org to request grant application forms. It's a great way to stay connected to your profession and VEA friends.

Colonial Retired United Educators

By Sam Eure

The past 16 months have been a whirlwind of activity for CRUE. An almost strictly social group, meeting once a month, became active and engaged in providing invaluable assistance to the locals of the Colonial UniServ and more involved in VEA activities. Kristen Young and Sam Eure initially activated the lunch group.

CRUE has visited over 33 schools in Newport News and Hampton. Kristen and Sam began visiting schools in Newport News with a focus on establishing positive relationships with leadership teams at each site. UniServ Director, Raven Wilkerson, assigned in May to the area, also participated in the visits. The trio visited eight schools through July. NNEA visits have been paused until internal communication is clarified.

The group pivoted to assisting the Hampton EA. Working with local leaders, the goal is to increase visibility, presence, present benefits, encourage membership, meet current members, and update information at work sites. CRUE visited 21 visits across 18 different schools. Every opportunity for visitation has been used - attending faculty meetings, visiting during lunch periods, and being present on site all day. HEA/VEA/NEA visibility allowed reconnecting with members, engaging and presenting information to nonmembers, and describing the benefits, and collective support that comes with membership.

Incentives were provided to boost interest – we had five raffles for \$30 gift cards and gave away snacks and VEA swag at every event. Ruthann Kellum and Sam Eure conducted most of the visits. Other CRUE providers were Kristen Young, Rita Cooper, and Brenda Spruell.

Our bylaws have been approved and CRUE has been formally affiliated with a vote from the Colonial UniServ Council. Partial elections were conducted in May electing a president, vice president, treasurer, and one board member.

CRUE assisted in the conduct of four of the six local NTO/NEO events. The manpower provided was critical in the accomplishment of the locals' new staff orientations. Hampton, Gloucester, Newport News, and York were provided invaluable assistance to the tune of 37 volunteer hours over an eight-day period.



***Pictured left:
Gwyn Lomax
and Ruthann
Kellum***

***Pictured right:
Kristin Young,
Andrea Lonzago
(Hampton EA
president),
Gwyn Lomax,
and Ruthann
Kellum***



VEA-Retired Vision Committee Report (continued)

By Dot Walton

The committee brought its work to the VEA-Retired Council on March 20-21, 2025, and the Council gave its permission for President McDowell and Chair Dot Walton to meet with President Bauer and ED Wiman to exchange viewpoints and perspectives on the work to date. The Council unanimously approved the report and recommendations from the committee.

President McDowell and Chair Walton had a very cordial and productive meeting President Bauer and ED Wiman on May 12, 2025. Highlights of the meeting were as follows:

- Two surveys, one for VEA-Retired members and one for VEA local leaders, created by the committee were approved. Information from the surveys will be shared.
- A plaque honoring VEA-Retired Martha Wood Distinguished Service Award recipients has been purchased and wall space will be made available.
- ED Wiman has agreed to meet with the VEA-Retired president, vice president, and 2nd at-large BOD member on a regular basis.

Both the retired member survey and the active leadership survey were sent out at the beginning of June with a response deadline at the end of June. Many thanks to those who responded, but generally, the response rate for both was lower than we had hoped. More responses from active leadership were obtained at the leadership training in July with encouragement from President Bauer.

President McDowell and Chair Walton met again with President Bauer and ED Wiman in September. The following are take-aways from our meeting:

- Copies of the VEA-Retired member responses will be provided to the appropriate UD's.
- Both surveys will be sent out again. Retired members who respond to the survey will be entered in a drawing for a \$50 gift card.
- VEA-Retired Council members will use information from the surveys to match retired members who are willing to volunteer with VEA locals in their district that are looking for assistance.

Share Your Interest and Enter to Win!

Our survey has been reopened to give everyone another chance to respond! This time we're offering an extra incentive: complete the survey and you'll be entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card. If you've already responded, thank you – your response has been received and you're already entered in the drawing.

Please take a few minutes to respond to our survey by clicking [HERE](#).



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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



Do you have a new email address or have you moved?

We don't want to lose touch with you! If any of your contact information changes, please consider letting us know in one of two ways:

1. Complete the contact update form at: vea.link/vear-update
2. Email your information to: vearetired@veanea.org

We appreciate your help!