2012

VIRGINIA McKNIGHT BINGER

Awards in Human Service

FRIDAY, AUGUST 24TH, 2012

THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

About the Awards

The Virginia McKnight Binger Awards in Human Service are an annual tradition at The McKnight Foundation. The awards reflect the Foundation's deep belief in the virtue and power of compassion. Since its inception, this honor has gone to 271 Minnesotans, including this year's group. Each recipient has given time and effort to help others with no expectation of material reward. Each exemplifies the life-changing difference one person can make through service.

In 1985, the Foundation created the Awards in Human Service, which were renamed 10 years later in tribute to Virginia McKnight Binger. Mrs. Binger served the Foundation for nearly 50 years as a board member, as president from 1974 to 1987, and then as honorary chair until her death in 2002. Although William L. and Maude L. McKnight established the Foundation, it was the compassion and personal generosity of their daughter that set the standard for such work.

Like Virginia McKnight Binger in her time, the recipients of these awards are acutely aware of others' needs. Each was nominated in confidence by someone familiar with their work. Nominees live and volunteer in Minnesota and show commitment to helping others achieve a better life. All nominations were researched and independently evaluated.

The Foundation accepts nominations year-round. Beginning in May, a committee of volunteers who are active in various human service fields evaluates the nominations and recommends finalists to the Foundation's board of directors. Each approved awardee receives $10,000. For more information about the program, visit the Foundation's website at www.mcknight.org.

Our Mission

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, we use our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve.

AWARDEES

MARY FARLEY Crookston

IBRAHIM HUSSEIN Owatonna

DIANE KINNEY St. Paul

CHERYL MELD McGregor

GINO NELSON Lakeville

GADA ROBA Minneapolis

PROGRAM

THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

710 South Second Street, Minneapolis
12:00 to 2:00 p.m.
Friday, August 24, 2012

PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

Kate Wolford, PRESIDENT
Erik Torch, AWARDS COMMITTEE

AWARDS IN HUMAN SERVICE COMMITTEE

Jolene Anderson, ST. PAUL
Audrey Arner, MONTEVIDEO
Linda Lares, ALBERT LEA
Sue Liedl, BEMIDJI
Angie Theisen, WAITE PARK
Erik Torch, DULUTH

ATTEND

RESPOND

HELP · GIVE

DEDICATE

UNITE

ELEVATE · INSPIRE

Transform

EMPOWER

Statement by BOARD CHAIR

On the cover of the 2012 Virginia McKnight Binger Awards in Human Service program, you'll find the image of a black-capped chickadee. Voted Minnesota's favorite bird a few years back, this little bird tends to fly under the radar most of the time. Still, there are many qualities that endear the chickadee to Minnesotans.

They attend. Nothing distracts chickadees from the business at hand. Unlike many birds, they forage not only upright, but also upside down. And cold weather doesn't slow them down either — they have a special ability to lower their body temperature, reducing the calories needed to survive. By working tirelessly and by adapting, they achieve more with less every day.

They unite. Don't be deceived by their simple and familiar *"chick-a-dee-dee-dee"* call; it is an amazingly complex rallying cry. The call consists of up to four distinct units, arranged in different patterns to share important information and to coordinate group movement.

They empower. Chickadees invite birds of *many* feathers to flock together! Other bird species join their foraging, especially when they gather in winter. These mixed flocks likely stay together because chickadees are so diligent about calling out when food is discovered. Their focus on the flock inspires group cohesion, helping all the birds to attain resources more efficiently.

Like the humble black-capped chickadee gracing our program, our six awardees also attend to meaningful efforts in rural and urban areas, indoors and out, and through all kinds of weather. They unite people in meaningful ways to support youth, veterans, newcomers, and ex-offenders. And these six model Minnesotans empower so many in need to face challenges head-on and with dignity, backed by heartfelt compassion and commitment.

Today's remarkable awardees are vital partners and leaders who help keep our state's cities, neighborhoods, and individual citizens strong. They aptly reflect the values behind all McKnight's work, and our belief in the individual as the foundation on which all successful societies rest. On behalf of The McKnight Foundation and the awards committee, I commend these awardees for their boundless compassion and humble work on behalf of others.

TED STARYK
CHAIR, THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

Mary Farley

Mary Farley is a mother, grandmother, and wife, and many in her Crookston community consider her family. You can often find Mary in her kitchen making jams and jellies that she sells to earn extra cash to care for the adopted animals on her farm. However, there is far more to her story. Mary has spent her life ministering to convicts at the regional jail; reintegrating homeless adults into communities that didn't want them; finding treatment for individuals with mental illness; and advocating for immigrants and children who couldn't advocate for themselves. "Mary is a hero to those in need," said Susan Mills, retired executive director at the Tri-County Corrections Center.

David, one of the homeless men who Mary served while working at the Care and Share Shelter, agrees. "I had been drifting most of my adult life," he said. "Mary was intent on instilling dignity, self-respect, and hope. She got me enrolled at the University of Minnesota, Crookston. Today, I am a better person because of her. She has had a forever-lasting positive effect on my life."

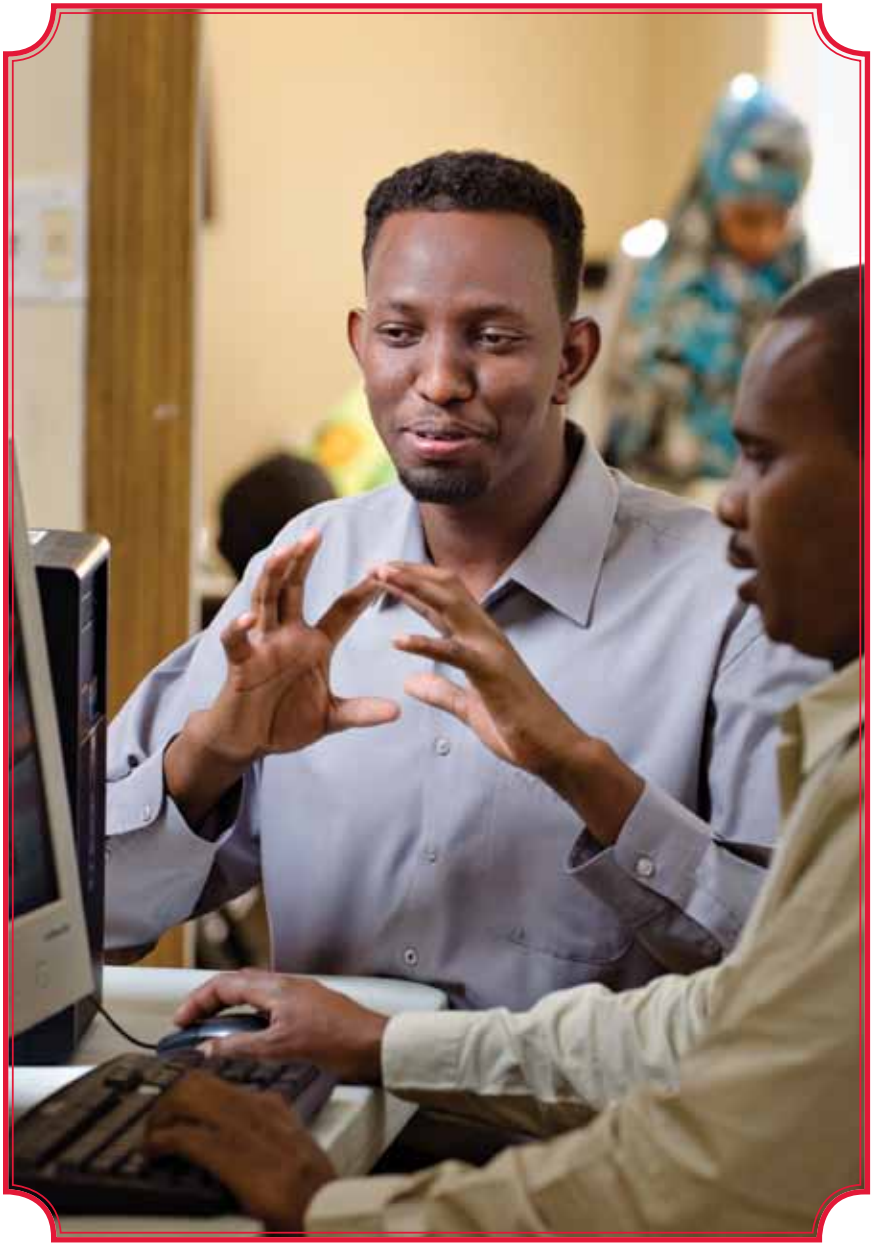
Those who Mary has helped over the years now frequently come to the farm to help with the horses, harvest plums and berries, or join in a family barbeque. The visits help build community, and for many, are therapeutic. One emotionally troubled six-year-old boy used to visit often. Even there he would sometimes get upset and have trouble calming himself. "He would run over to our blind pony, Ginger, hop up on her back and just lay on her for 15 to 20 minutes," said Mary.

Mary has the same ability to be the calm in the storm, while lifting people up. "When you lift one person up, they in turn lift others up," she said. "When you give, you always get more back in return."

"Mary will tell you she is fluent only in English, but Mary speaks 'people' better than anyone. Her patience and self-effacing nature hide a true intelligence for taking individuals as they are and helping them move to be the person they want to be."

—Susan Mills, *Tri-County Community Corrections (retired)*

Ibrahim Hussein



When Ibrahim Hussein immigrated to the United States from Africa in 2007, he knew it would be difficult to find his place in a new community. Even though he spoke English and Swahili fluently and had been a teacher in Kenya, getting a job in Owatonna was hard. "I really like working with kids and was willing to take any position," said Ibrahim. "I applied to many schools." Finally he was hired by Wilson Elementary School as a Somali liaison for two hours per day for five weeks, after which he was offered a full time job at McKinley Elementary. Since nearly 25 percent of McKinley's students are Somali, Ibrahim quickly became inundated with requests from parents to tutor their children after school.

Ibrahim's willingness to help led to more requests from adults for assistance with English language tutoring, job applications, interpreting, and general support adjusting to American culture. Somali immigrants soon began showing up during Ibrahim's breaks and lunch hour asking for help. He knew something needed to be done.

"I know the Somali culture well and knew I could help," he said. With support from community members, Ibrahim started the Somali American Cultural Society of Owatonna (SACSO). What began as a simple idea is today a thriving community center. The center is open every day after school, buzzing with children doing schoolwork and adults learning computer skills with help from community volunteers. Ibrahim is the driving force at the center. Parents claim that without the extra help, many of their students would have trouble keeping up in school.

"I started SACSO because I feel I need to give back to my community," said Ibrahim. "I feel guilty knowing that I am doing well. I need to help my people and my community because I love them both."

"In all my years as a principal, I cannot think of many others that do more or have a bigger impact on the lives of our children than Ibrahim. If we had more people like him in our world, we would all be better off; and we would all be better people."

—Bob Olson, *McKinley Elementary School*

Diane Kinney

When Diane Kinney founded Base Camp Hope, an organization to help veterans learn to cope with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), she knew she had found her calling. "PTSD is often the root cause of unemployment, homelessness, and substance abuse after combat," she said. "We need to show these veterans how to seek help and find ways to calm the nightmares."

Base Camp Hope takes a comprehensive approach to addressing PTSD. One-on-one counseling sessions are supported with group and family counseling and innovative art, music, and writing therapies. "We consider the spiritual, mental, physical, and psychological aspects of those we help," added Diane.

Diane's impact on the lives of veterans and their families is profound. "Picture me sitting in my driveway with the children in the backseat, suitcases in the trunk, and a husband refusing to communicate," said Emily, who is married to Jack, an Iraq war veteran. "I didn't know what to do." When Emily called Base Camp Hope, Diane came right over. Jack had all the symptoms of PTSD. Since returning home, he had been depressed and moody. He often yelled. He could not touch or play with his son. As a result, their son was acting out in kindergarten, Emily was considering leaving, and their house was in disarray. Diane initiated a series of free family counseling sessions.

Fast-forward one year: Jack has a full-time job, Emily is studying psychology to help others with PTSD, and their son is doing well in a new school and knows his daddy is okay. "Diane's deep knowledge about PTSD and her ability to forge strong relationships helped heal our wounded family," Emily said.

"My message to veterans is 'There is hope.' It is possible to get back to normalcy and doing the things you love to do," said Diane.

"Diane does not just dedicate her time to helping veterans; her entire life is dedicated to helping others. Her passion for helping those who are lost and in despair is second nature to her."

—Rhonetta Cooper, *Base Camp Hope Grant Writer*

Cheryl Meld

When Cheryl Meld meets a teen who wants to join the Kids Plus program, she welcomes them with open arms. "We try to accept the kids where they are," said Cheryl. "We're not critiquing. They're not being graded. We try to connect kids with their interests. We invite them to be involved because they have something to offer."

For 18 years Cheryl has directed Kids Plus, a program serving children and youth, many of whom are from low-income families with special needs or little parental support. The program allows youth to volunteer, receive homework help, gain employment experience, participate in recreational activities, and enjoy intergenerational connections. "Thanks to Cheryl, a huge number of kids who were on the fringe have found a place where they are valued," said Brenda Hadrich, retired health and physical education teacher in the McGregor School District.

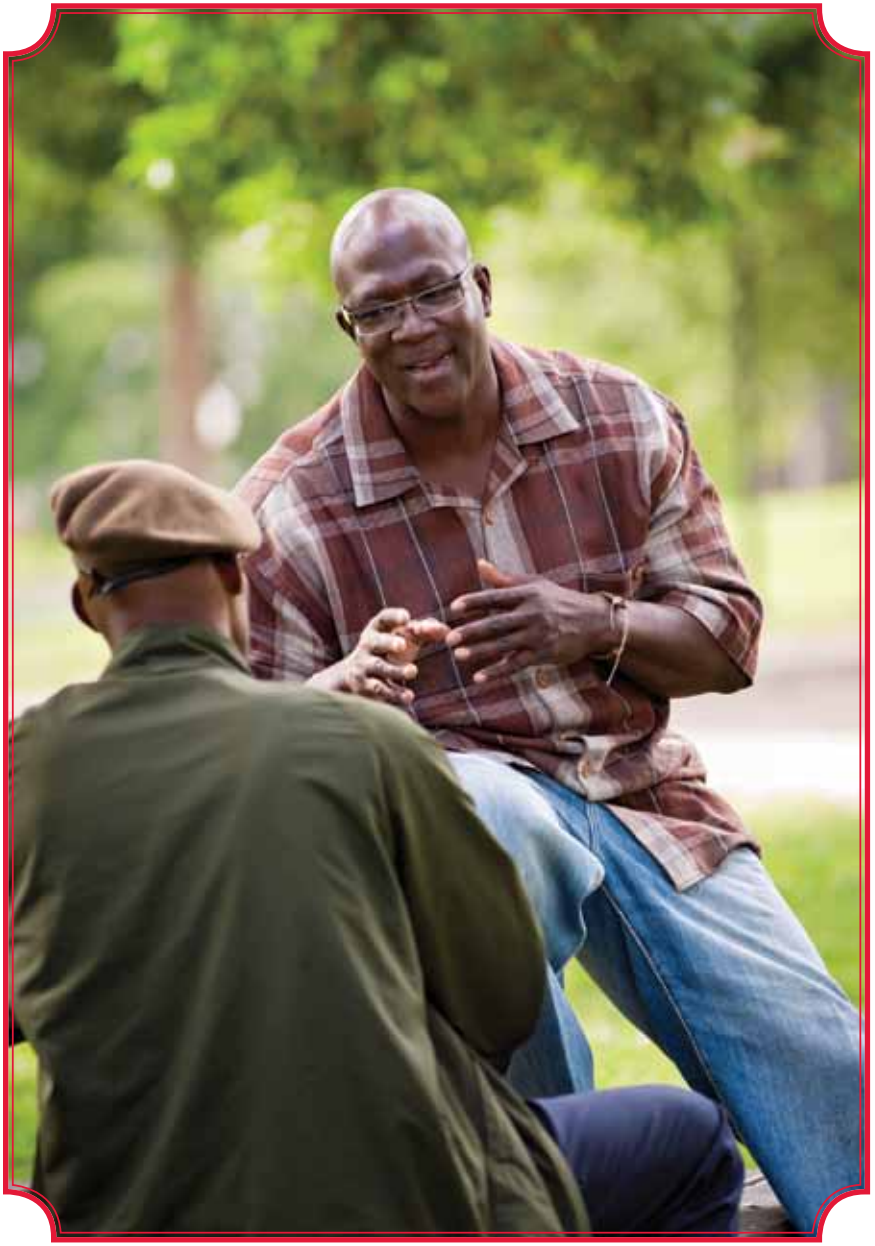
Kelly is one teen for whom Kids Plus made all the difference. With parents in and out of drug rehab and siblings in foster care, Kelly was often left on her own. "Being involved with Kids Plus kept me out of trouble," said Kelly. "Instead of partying, I got volunteer experience. I got help with homework. I went to fun and educational conferences." Today, Kelly is in college and will soon graduate with a degree in counseling.

After nearly two decades, some kids who were in the program as teens now have kids of their own in Kids Plus, because they want their children to have the same positive experiences as they had. Cheryl is excited to see the momentum. "People make up the community. It's not the buildings or services," she said. "Everybody has something they can offer to make the community a better place. I just encourage people to get involved."

"Underlying all of Cheryl's hard work is her genuine commitment, respect, and care for people. She engages community members of all ages in dialogue about the needs of young people and shares her excitement about working with and on behalf of youth."

—Brenda Hadrich, *McGregor School District (Retired)*

Gino Nelson



Gino Nelson believes in people. He also believes in having a plan. "A lot of people call me for mentoring support and advice. They ask me, 'What would you do in this situation?' I turn it around, 'What would you do?' The ownership needs to fall on them going forward, so I just say, 'Let's work through this,'" he said.

The hundreds of individuals Gino has helped during his 26 years at Catholic Charities and St. Stephen's Human Services are usually homeless, often ex-offenders, and frequently using drugs or involved in gangs. "Gino devotes time to helping these individuals lead better, more productive lives by teaching them to believe in themselves," said Nancy Galas who volunteered with Gino at the Neighborhood Involvement Program in Minneapolis. "Many are in a place where they feel drugs and gang life are their only options, but Gino devotes his time outside of work hours, engaging them and making a connection with them."

Besides working with Twin Cities' landlords to find housing for homeless individuals, Gino helps ex-offenders find jobs, visits inmates in prison, and meets clients after hours to go to a movie or coffee house to show them there are options other than hanging on the street corner. At least 50 people with whom Gino has worked stay in constant contact. "I have guys writing me from prison," said Gino. "I always write back right away. If you get back to them, they stay encouraged."

However, as he works with these individuals, Gino is clear that they need to develop a plan for their lives. "I tell them, 'I don't do the work. The work is yours.' I'm just the bridge, the path over to a better life," he said. "But no matter how bad things are, I know that people can change."

"Gino has helped many men – current and ex-offenders, past and present gang members, those who are drowning in a swamp of crime – navigate a course out of the hopelessness to a better, brighter future; one worth staying alive for. He makes them realize that they can create a life worth living."

—Nancy Galas, *University of Minnesota*

Gada Roba

While growing up in war-torn Oromia, Gada Roba witnessed unimaginable atrocities. After spending three miserable years as a refugee in Kenya, he arrived in South Dakota in 1998. He was 16. While living with extended family, his uncle wanted him to work to send money back home. However, Gada wanted an education. "I realized, 'If I don't get my education right now I'll never have another chance,'" Gada said.

So on his own Gada moved to Minneapolis. He was living in a homeless shelter when he met a family who took him in, asking nothing in return. "They told me, 'We had a chance to be a part of your life. Now we want you to go out and make a difference; helping others.' That drove me," he said.

After graduating from college in 2009, Gada received an internship with a U.S.- based agency in Kenya. But he put those plans on hold when the American Oromo Community of Minnesota (AOCM) approached him. As AOCM's executive director, Gada began addressing the myriad challenges facing his community in Minnesota. While he was pulled in many directions, he knew AOCM needed to focus on youth. "Young people in our community have so much potential to succeed, but there is no culturally appropriate programming to help them fully integrate." Gada led the process of transforming AOCM from a refugee resettlement organization to one that provides Oromo youth with mentorship, tutoring, and leadership opportunities through partnerships, helping them understand their history and navigate two cultures.

While Gada now works at Wellstone International and Roosevelt High School, he is still AOCM's board chair. "When I work with young people, I use myself as an example. I tell them, 'This is what I've been through, and this is how I've overcome it.' I'm their advocate."

"Gada's commitment to serve others is a lifestyle choice, not just a job choice. He is paving the way for other Oromo youth and is bringing his community with him on his journey toward creating a brighter Oromo American future."

—Jonathan Reynolds, *Jackson Elementary School*

About McKnight

VIRGINIA McKNIGHT BINGER AWARDS IN HUMAN SERVICE

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The McKnight Foundation is committed to the protection of our environment, a philosophy that underlies our practice of using paper with postconsumer waste content, and where possible, environmentally friendly inks. This book was printed on paper containing 100% post-consumer fibers using soy inks. Wind energy credits were purchased for its production. Additionally, we partner with printers and use papers that are Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified. The FSC standards represent the world's strongest social and environmental systems for guiding forest management and the use of paper resources toward sustainable outcomes.

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ABOUT THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

The McKnight Foundation, a Minnesota-based family foundation, seeks to improve the quality of life for present and future generations. Through grantmaking, collaboration, and encouragement of strategic policy reform, we use our resources to attend, unite, and empower those we serve. The Foundation's grantmaking priorities include regional economic and community development, the arts, the environment, neuroscience, international crop research, and early literacy. The Foundation's primary geographic focus is the state of Minnesota.

Founded in 1953 and endowed by William and Maude McKnight, The McKnight Foundation had assets of approximately $1.9 billion and granted about $91 million in 2011. More information and program-specific grantmaking guidelines are available at www.mcknight.org.

PREVIOUS RECIPIENTS

Since 1985, The McKnight Foundation has honored 271 Minnesotans with the Virginia McKnight Binger Awards in Human Service, including this year's honorees. All past recipients are listed online at **www.mcknight.org/VMBawardees.**

THE McKNIGHT FOUNDATION

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