

# NEA honors the everyday heroes who fight for racial and social justice

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**By: Mary Ellen Flannery**

From the NEA-Retired member who helps find shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth in Wisconsin to the pair of Utah teachers who have exponentially increased the number of Latino students in their high school's Advanced Placement classes, [the eleven phenomenal honorees of the 2020 NEA Human and Civil Rights \(HCR\) Awards](#) are “the righteous angels among us,” said NEA President Lily Eskelsen García.

On Wednesday evening, with thousands of NEA members watching online, they were recognized in the first-ever virtual celebration of the historic NEA HCR Awards, an event that dates back to the 1966 merger between NEA and the American Teachers Association (ATA). At that time, NEA members mostly were white, while ATA mostly represented Black teachers in segregated schools.

“We agreed in that merger that we would celebrate every year those who had distinguished themselves in the fight for racial and social justice,” explained Eskelsen García, “that we would lift up their names and tell their stories as inspirational examples of courage.”

This year's event theme, “We Rise Together,” proved particularly appropriate in the wake of George Floyd's May 25 murder by Minneapolis police, and the month of unifying, anti-police violence protests that followed in cities across America. “I think it's the perfect theme for this year's ceremony,” she said, “as we see the courageous actions from educators, community

members, our students, community organizations, and the work of our HCR award winners themselves.”

## ‘Silence is violence’

Wednesday’s event recognized Stacey Abrams, recipient of the NEA President’s HCR Award for her work as founder of Fair Fight, an initiative to stop the suppression of young voters and voters of color. “Growing up, my parents had three tenets for my siblings and me: go to school, go to church, and take care of each other. They understood that education was the essential ingredient,” Abrams said.

“The work that NEA does to ensure that every student in America, no matter their background, receives a quality education is vital to our democracy,” she said. “Thank you to the 3.2 million members of the NEA who are working to ensure that our nation’s future is more equitable and just. I am deeply humbled by your work and this honor.”

The event also featured videos, available at [neahcrawards.org](http://neahcrawards.org), from the NEA members and community groups who earned this year’s awards. They include a message from Valerie Castile, who founded the Philando Castile Relief Foundation after her only son was shot and killed July 5, 2016, by a Minnesota police officer. “Shot five times while seat-belted in his car,” his mother reminded viewers. The officer was found not guilty of manslaughter in 2017.

Philando Castile, who was Black, worked as a cafeteria supervisor at a local elementary school, where he knew every child by name and often paid their lunch bills out of his own pocket. Now, the foundation named for him, which won the 2020 Reg Weaver Human and Civil Rights Award, covers the negative lunch balance for students in need, while advocating for police reform. Since her son died, 88 more Americans have lost their lives at the hands of “peace officers,” said Valerie Castile.

“Silence is violence, and we have to be more pro-active about what’s happening to our citizens,” she said.

## Learn more about the winners

Other HCR award recipients include:

- *Bonnie Augusta*, a retired Wisconsin teacher dedicated to creating safe, nurturing spaces for LGBTQ youth, including those experiencing homelessness, won the Virginia Uribe Memorial Award for Creative Leadership in Human Rights;
- *DREAM BIG*, a program by Utah teachers Melanie Moffatt and Anna Martinez Williams to increase Latino student success in pre-college classes, earned the George I. Sánchez Memorial Award;
- *The Empowerment Network*, an Omaha, Nebraska, coalition that addresses issues of poverty, employment, and housing, received the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Award;
- *Benjamin Grignon*, a Wisconsin teacher of traditional Menominee arts, won the Leo Reano Memorial Award;

- *Inclusive Communities*, an Omaha, Nebraska, non-profit that has promoted racial justice and equity for nearly 100 years, earned the Rosa Parks Memorial Award;
- *Patricia Payne*, an Indiana retired teacher who has worked for six decades to foster inclusionary education, won the H. Council Trenholm Memorial Award (Black);
- *The Polynesian Voyaging Society*, a nearly 50-year effort to preserve Hawaiian nautical expertise and other traditional arts, won the Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award;
- *Voces de la Frontera*, a coalition of low-wage workers and immigrant youth activists dedicated to expanding workers' rights, received the César Chávez Acción y Compromiso Award;
- And *Zulfat Suara*, the first Muslim-American elected to the Metropolitan Nashville City Council, who ran on an inclusive platform of school funding and women's rights, won the Mary Hatwood Futrell Human and Civil Rights Award.

“This is a celebration of those who will not be silent, for those... who will act, no matter who pushes back, no matter who attacks them, no matter how inconvenient or uncomfortable their protests and actions make powerful people feel,” Eskelsen García said.

Watch the recorded event:

