

NSSRA honors shining stars at awards banquet



NSSRA participant Chloe LaVarre and NSSRA staffer Salena Jason, both of Northbrook, celebrate on the dance floor at the conclusion of the NSSRA's Shining Stars award banquet on April 20 in Northbrook. Photo Submitted.

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The Northern Suburban Special Recreation Association (NSSRA) held its annual Shining Stars awards and recognition banquet at the Hilton Chicago/Northbrook on April 20, and eight of the nine honorees were from communities served by 22nd Century Media publications.

“We serve all ages and all abilities,” NSSRA Executive Director Craig Culp said. “If you like to play and you have a disability, we’ve got a spot for you. Of those, we serve 51 percent are youth and 49 percent are adults. Our youngest is 4 and our oldest is in his 80s.”

Three of the individuals served by NSSRA — Thomas Jacktorowycz, of Glenview, Matt Rubin, of Lake Bluff, and James Gromoshak, of Highwood, — were among the Shining Stars banquet luminaries.

Jacktorowycz, who is age 11, was the recipient of the Youth Participant of the Year Award; Rubin, who is age 26, was the recipient of the Adult Participant of the Year Award; and Gromoshak was the recipient of the Gator Athlete of the Year Award.

“As a parent, I cannot say enough on how much James has grown by being a part of NSSRA,” Gromoshak’s mother, Pat Lenzini, told the 440 people in the banquet hall. “He has made so many wonderful friends.”

Megan Kivarkis, of Northbrook, was honored as Volunteer of the Year; Glenn Binstein, of Glenview, as Friend of the Year; and Jerry Matsumoto, wife Lynne and sons Jason and Dane, of Wilmette, as Family of the Year.

“Dane is 33-years-old and he has been in NSSRA programs for 25 years,” Jerry said. “It’s a wonderful, nurturing, supportive place.”

The City of Lake Forest Parks & Recreation Department received the Partner Agency of the Year Award and the Glenbrook South High School Peer Mentors received the Advocate of the Year Award.

Sally Swarthout, director of Lake Forest Parks, Recreation and Forestry, accepted the Partner Agency Award.

Accepting the Advocate of the Year Award was Mary Z. Jaeger, a retired GBS teacher, who started the Peer Mentoring program at the school during the 1986-87 school year.

The ninth honoree was the recipient of the Program Staff of the Year Award, Sarah Hunter, who resides in Chicago’s Norwood Park neighborhood.

Candice Cunningham, of Arlington Heights, was recognized for 15 years of service with the NSSRA during which she has played what Culp described as “a key role” in the Enriched Lifestyles for Adults (ELA) program that currently serves 24 individuals. ELA participants attend the program for up to five days per week for 48 weeks per year.

“I am very grateful to be part of this team,” Cunningham said. “It has been an honor and a privilege.”

Rebekah Lee, NSSRA manager of marketing and communications, said NSSRA has approximately 1,600 participants yearly and about 7,000 registrations for a vast panorama of programs.

“We’re are like the park district for people with disabilities that comprises 13 member agencies within the northern suburbs,” she said. “There are several SRAs in Illinois; we’re the only state that has this model.”

The NSSRA is headquartered at 3105 MacArthur Blvd. in Northbrook. There are 21 full-time staff members, the part-time staff numbers 469 and last year there were 113 volunteers.

Wilmette, Kenilworth, Winnetka, Northfield, Glencoe, Highland Park, Highwood, Lake Forest, Lake Bluff, Northbrook and Glenview are among the 13 participating communities in the 22nd Century Publications reader area. They are joined by Deerfield and Riverwoods.

The Glenview Park District is the biggest contributor followed by the Northbrook Park District. Park Board members Dave Dillon and Dave Tosh and Superintendent of Leisure Services represented the Glenview Park District at the banquet, while the Northbrook delegation was headed by President Penny Randel and Vice President Mary Ann Chambers.

Culp has been the NSSRA executive director for 10 years and has been working in SRAs for a quarter of a century.

“I came right out of college,” said Culp, who earned his degree in recreation at Illinois State. “I wanted to do something that is meaningful and that I loved to do. It has been quite an adventure ever since.

“NSSRA is 48 years old and we have participants who have been with us for more than 40 years. They started as kids and now they’re adults. That’s the gift we as a staff receive. We are their main connection to the community. We get a lot out of it. We get to develop relationships with families, which not many professions allow. So many families tell me that we’re part of their family.

“We have three revenue sources. No. 1 is our 10 Park districts, two villages and one city; No. 2 is our program fees; and No. 3 is our NSSRA Foundation and other grants. Our foundation is in its 21st year and in that time it has raised more than \$2 million specifically for us. The foundation buys our buses — the 10 vehicles we use to transport participants — and the main funder of our scholarships. In 2017, we gave out almost \$44,000 in scholarships to families who have children with disabilities and need financial assistance to participate in our programs.”

Ron Fowler has served as president of the NSSRA Foundation for the past two years. The foundation sponsored the awards and recognition banquet with the assistance of local businesses, community supporters and individual donors.

“We have a son, Sam, in the program and that’s how my wife, Kim, and I got involved eight years ago,” Fowler said. “It’s a fantastic program. We have the means to pay for what our son needs and our family has benefited so much.

“A lot of people don’t have the means to do it and that’s what got me on the board, raising money for those people who are under financial stress and can’t afford the programs. When you’re already spending money on therapies and you’re dealing with financial stress you can’t afford to spend \$200 to send your kid to a recreational camp.”

In 2017, NSSRA offered six camps, held 78 special events, sponsored six trips and sent 84 of its athletes to the Special Olympics Summer Games at Illinois State, where they competed in 10 sports and earned 125 medals. Every summer for 41 years, NSSRA has been sending participants 18 and up to Camp Wigwam in Maine to develop individual living skills and gain new leisure skills.

Among the many youth programs are learn to ride a bike, private piano lessons and horseback riding. Included on the list of adult programs are aquacise, strength and conditioning, choir and horseback riding.

“We have Friday night social programs for teenagers and all day programs on Saturday,” Lee said. “And a lot of times we have tournaments with other SRAs. We commonly say we have something for kids age 3 through people age 99.”

But then, the NSSRA manager of marketing and communications hastened to add: “If somebody turned 100 we probably would make an exception.”