



FOSTER & ADOPTIVE CARE COALITION

FOR EVERY CHILD... A PLACE TO CALL HOME

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Many area residents are not aware that Maya Angelou, poet, role model, civil rights leader and avid volunteer was born Marguerite Ann Johnson in our hometown of St. Louis. Her recent passing has beamed a light on her many accomplishments. Her greatest gifts – perhaps – are the words she crafted that changed lives.

One of her most famous quotes explains why many individuals and local companies are dedicated to helping disadvantaged youth through The Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition. They subscribe Angelou's challenge to *"Try to be a rainbow in someone's cloud."*

At a recent volunteer ceremony held by the Coalition, those who served as rainbows – many times over – for our area's children were recognized. The Coalition thanks all honorees for their extraordinary commitment to help create permanence in every foster child's life.

Vantage Credit Union was named the "Community Outreach Volunteer of the Year" for its work over a decade to equip school supplies and backpacks to children in foster care. Over this time, Vantage and its employees have donated 22,000 pencils, 8,000 notebooks and folders, 2,000 reams of paper, 3,000 boxes of markers and crayons and many other supplies too numerous to mention. Their commitment is commendable because they understand that having the same school supplies as other students is important to a foster child's self-esteem. Thanks to their efforts, foster children are fully outfitted when the first-day-of-school bell rings.

The Junior League of St. Louis and its president, Maureen Strasheim, were recognized for "Volunteer Group of the Year". The Junior League created the Little Wishes program which provides childhood life experiences for foster children. Since its creation ten years ago, more than 30,000 gifts have been given to foster and adoptive children.

Thomson Reuters, an innovation company that makes information easily accessible to clients regardless of their location, was named "Little Wishes Volunteer of the Year." Thomson Reuters' employees donated 153 hours over a 12-day period. Employee Mike Czopek was a real hero when he automated a process that was critical in distributing holiday "Little Wishes," saving Coalition staff and volunteers countless hours of manual work.

Kevin Wisniewski was recognized as "REFRESH Volunteer of the Year." REFRESH is a fashion-forward store run by the Coalition that sells previously owned contemporary clothing for every family member. All proceeds support the Coalition's many support services. A Retail major at the University of Missouri-Columbia, Kevin not only assists with selling, merchandising and providing professional consulting – but she also mentors foster teens who work in the store as a way to gain experience for employment. Since beginning with REFRESH, Kevin has volunteered more than 260 hours.

Marti Lanese was recognized as "Ongoing Volunteer of the Year." An adopted child herself, Marti has a great connection with the Coalition. She provides both financial and "in-the-trenches" support. A mainstay in the office, Marti does literally anything that will help the children, no matter how routine. She said, "I try to do some of the mundane tasks that are a necessary part of any organization so that those who are paid can concentrate on the bigger picture."

Connie Lohr received the award for “Special Events Volunteer of the Year.” She has helped spearhead Old Bags™, a highly successful annual silent auction featuring new and gently used designer handbags. Connie is relentless in collecting handbags and is an expert at researching brands, determining value and recommending how to best merchandise them. All of her efforts have made this event the premier fundraiser for the Coalition. Because of Connie’s efforts, foster and adoptive children have been able to benefit from many new and enhanced services.

Jackie Olinger received recognition as “Junior Board Volunteer of the Year.” As president, she has chaired fundraisers such as Trivia Night, a kickball tournament and adult scavenger hunts. She has a unique affinity with the Coalition because she has two adopted brothers and grew up with a foster brother. Through her personal experience, she knows first-hand the importance of every child having a place to call home. Through her involvement in the Coalition she is taking tangible steps to help make this happen for as many children as possible.

Laura Leuken was named “Board of Directors Volunteer of the Year” for her 340-plus volunteer hours since 2011 and her ability to recruit others who have given 300 hours of their time. She was also instrumental in gaining \$200,000 from the Bank of America’s Neighborhood Builders® grant for high-performing non-profits. Laura’s dedication to the Coalition stems from her own close relationship with her parents. “I can’t imagine growing up without them. Every kid deserves someone to trust and depend upon.”

The Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition, a proud member of the United Way, is a non-profit agency that strives to create permanency in every foster child's life by recruiting and supporting foster/adoptive homes in the Metropolitan community. For more information on volunteer opportunities, contact Shelley Thomas-Benke at the Foster & Adoptive Care Coalition -- 314.367.8373 x2229 or shelleythomasbenke@foster-adopt.org