

2021 Impact Award Winners

LOCAL IMPACT AWARD WINNERS WELL VERSED IN THE WAYS OF KINDNESS

The 2021 Impact Award winners have been announced by VISIT Lake Geneva, and you could say this year's four recipients are each wonderfully "bookish" in their own way, learning the craft or avocation about which they're passionate and living the values they hold dear. These annual awards honor those who've gone above and beyond to enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors.

The recipients were nominated by their peers and voted on by the board of directors of VISIT Lake Geneva. Time to meet them.

STU HERZOG OUTSTANDING CITIZEN AWARD

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

For years, Larry Kundert was so busy running the family dairy farm and raising his family that he had scant time to read, and when he did it was usually a farming magazine. Yet he always loved reading, so when he finally had more time on his hands after moving from dairy farming to crop farming and relocating from the farmstead to a home in the city, he became a regular at the Lake Geneva Public Library. As Larry tells it, it was back in 1995 when a member of the Friends of the Library group approached him and asked if he'd like to volunteer. He joined the Friends, then the Library Board of Trustees serving as treasurer and financial secretary, and then became involved in the Library Foundation.

"You could say I'm making up for lost time," said Larry. "Each of us has some responsibility to make the world a better place and I always ask myself, 'What am I doing to make situations better.'"

For patrons of the library, there's a good chance they've seen Larry organizing the book carts in front of the building this past year. He piles the carts with donated books he's carefully sorted as well as books weeded from the library supply. People can browse and choose a book, with a donation box attached to each cart. The idea was born of the pandemic and Larry said it's been hugely successful in collecting additional dollars for the library.

He also mentioned the current renovation of the library as a point of pride for the community, noting how patrons have "stepped forward in grand style," as he put it, to help improve the safety and accessibility of the building.

When he's not at the library, Larry and his wife like to volunteer at church and



LARRY KUNDELT

deliver Meals on Wheels. "The library and the church are an easy walk from my home, so my daily routine usually includes a stop at both," he shared.

Larry, like every good volunteer, doesn't do it for the recognition and he's clearly happiest being a behind-the-scenes kind of guy, so he was stunned when he learned he was this year's Stu Herzog

Outstanding Citizen Award recipient. "When Stephanie Klett of the visitor

bureau called me, I must have asked three times if this was a prank call," he laughed. "Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I would be considered, let alone win this award."

The Stu Herzog Award is presented to an individual who represents the Lake Geneva region at its very best, consistently making a positive difference.

COMMUNITY BETTERMENT AWARD

THE MORE YOU USE IT, THE MORE YOU GET OUT OF IT



EMILY KORNAK,
Library Director, Lake Geneva Public Library

Emily Kornak admits she is a present-focused kind of person, and the "present" for her is very full at the moment, wrapping

up a major renovation of the Lake Geneva Public Library where she serves as director, getting staff back in the building, and opening the library again to patrons.

With responsibilities for both day-to-day operations and long-range planning, there is never a typical day for Emily, just rewarding days. "We have lots of little moments of joy here every time we are able to give someone something they need, whether that's a book they couldn't find anywhere else, a quiet place to read or work, Internet access, or a gathering spot for book club with friends," she shared. "That's the beauty of the library, it can be whatever you need it to be at any point in your life, and the more you use it, the more you get out of it." She also heaped praise on her staff, adding that they're looking forward

to holding in-person programs again, including presentations on local history, cooking, and crafting, and story hours for young children.

Back to the renovation, which includes improvements to a building that has not been touched since it was built in 1954. The library has a distinct Prairie-style architecture and was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright protégé, James R. Dresser. "Along with safety and accessibility updates, we're bringing back some of the original features, including a fireplace that's been hidden, and improving that great sightline from the street through the windows to the lake," said Emily. "It's a great place to work."

Emily noted library usage continues to increase, a sure sign that people are still discovering the Lake Geneva Public Library. "It's part of a healthy community and it's here for everyone."

The Community Betterment Award is presented to a person, business or organization who enhances and improves the quality of life in the Lake Geneva region.

HOSPITALITY AWARD

INSPIRING CUSTOMERS TO TAKE ALL THOSE FOOD PHOTOS

David Scotney, owner of Oakfire, has a neat definition for hospitality at his restaurant. "We're big believers in the critical difference between meeting a guest's expectations and surprising and delighting a guest, and we're here to inspire someone to grab their phone, take a photo of the food, and post it to Instagram," said David. One look at all the Oakfire tagged photos and it's clear David's philosophy is working.

Oakfire grew out of David's passion, or as he jokingly calls it, obsession, to bring the best Neapolitan-style pizza to the Midwest. "I'm from Maryland, I paid for college working in seafood restaurants, and grew up on New York-style pizza. When we moved to the Midwest I missed that pizza, so I turned my home kitchen into a pizzeria of sorts, cooking for my neighbors to get their feedback and perfect my craft," he shared.

When he and his wife were vacationing in Lake Geneva, they noticed a restaurant for sale and decided to get into the business in earnest. "It was serendipitous and we had a gut feeling our restaurant concept would do well here, so we bought the property and reinvested every penny we made for the first two years to get to where we



DAVID SCOTNEY,
OWNER, OAKFIRE RESTAURANT

are today," David said. The 275-seat, multilevel Oakfire with spectacular views to Geneva Lake quickly gained followers for its pizza, especially the Margherita Di Bufala pizza. "The mozzarella is imported from Italy every Thursday and flown into O'Hare and I'm extremely proud of introducing that pizza to southern Wisconsin,"

said David.

Hospitality shows up in another way at Oakfire, and that's how David interacts with his staff. "I have the philosophy that I work for my staff, and one of the favorite parts of my job is to get in the kitchen and cook with them, creating the art form we call pizza." He added, "If I've learned anything, it's to treat your staff like gold and put energy into the little things." Little things such as bringing breakfast to the staff working weekend shifts and providing meals to the staff after a late Friday night of serving guests.

Finally, David and his team believe in extending the hospitality into the community, through donations to a local food pantry, perks for hard-working teachers, and specials for the locals.

If you're wondering what's next on the menu at Oakfire, David provided this hint. "We're looking to launch a Friday shrimp fry dinner, our own version of the classic Wisconsin fish fry."

The Hospitality Award is presented to a person or business who exemplifies outstanding customer service, care, and hospitality.

Rising Star Award:

A WARM WELCOME ALL AROUND

Monica Pfeifer has moved around a good bit for her career, building a stellar resume in hospitality, catering, and event planning after graduating from Lakeland University in Wisconsin with a double major in hospitality and business. Her initial training was actually at Lake Lawn Resort in Delavan. "I played golf in college and my first job was at the course there," said Monica. She and her husband Luke are both from Wisconsin and, after living most recently on the west coast, they were ready to find a way back home. That's when they discovered the Maxwell Mansion was for sale.

"Luke always wanted to own a hotel and I said I'm in if we could find the right property, and when we saw the photos of the Maxwell Mansion, a boutique property with events, I thought this could be it," Monica said.

The sale was completed at the end of last year, and Monica said she was taken from the start with how welcome they were made to feel. "Not every place is as welcoming as Lake Geneva, and the support from the community has been incredible." In turn, Monica said she wanted to take that outpouring of community support and pay it forward and she's doing that with donations to a variety of local non-profits, including the Geneva Lake Museum, the YMCA, and the Open Arms

free medical clinic in Walworth County.

Monica went on to note how everyone in the local tourism industry works so well together to promote the destination. "We're always recommending other businesses to our guests, there's enough to go around," said Monica.

While the award is for Monica, she turned attention to her staff, mentioning how well-versed they are in the finer points of hospitality, and to her husband and six-year-old daughter Bayleigh too. "We call Bayleigh the CEO and even gave her a nametag," she chuckled.

With a look ahead to year two of ownership, she's thinking about adding an appetizer menu to encourage visitors, including locals, to linger for a while. "Residents are still discovering us, our Speakeasy and Apothecary Bar are open to



MONICA PFEIFER,
CO-OWNER, MAXWELL MANSION

the public and we have live music events too," she noted. "We'd also love residents to experience an overnight staycation with us."

The Rising Star Award recognizes a person, organization, or business who, in five years or less in their respective field, has made a substantial impact in their profession.

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