

COMMONWEALTH

# HEROINES

CLASS OF 2026



23rd Annual Celebration of  
Commonwealth Heroines  
June 24, 2026

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## The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women (MCSW)

was legislatively created in 1998 as an independent state agency to advance rights and opportunities for all women and girls across the Commonwealth. The commission consists of 19 volunteer state commissioners who are appointed by the Governor, Senate President, Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Caucus of Women Legislators, and 11 regional commissions.

### MCSW State Commissioners

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Mary-dith Tuitt, Boston

MCSW Chairwoman

Christine Monska, Auburndale

MCSW Vice-Chair

Audrey Hall, Framingham

MCSW Treasurer

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Jean Fox, Freetown\*\*

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Legislative & Public Policy Committee Vice-Chair

Shela Levante, Pittsfield

Leslie-Ann McGee, Falmouth\*\*

Dr. Aisha Miller, Mattapan

Program and Planning Committee Secretary

Lise Olney, Wellesley

Legislative & Public Policy Committee Secretary

Heather Panahi, Wellesley

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Sonia Shah, Natick\*\*

Dr. Emily Wilson, Plymouth

*\*\*We are especially grateful to these Commissioners who graciously extended their term of service for longer than their appointed term until their successor was appointed.*

### MCSW Staff

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Shaitia Spruell, Lancaster

MCSW Executive Director

Marjorie C. Bernadeau-Alexandre, Roslindale

Administration & Finance Director

Tina Games, Harwich

Regional Commissions Director

Ellen Moorhouse, Springfield

Communications and Marketing Director

Darlene Kelter, Lynnfield

Administrative Assistant

Raven Harris, Springfield

MCSW Clerk & Executive Assistant

Madeleine McCarthy, Boston

Regional Operations Coordinator

### MCSW Interns

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Renée Asafo-Adjei

Bentley University

Olivia Honeycutt

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Christian Nakihei

Boston College



## Greetings!

On behalf of all of us here at the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women (MCSW), we thank you for your extraordinary work on behalf of the Commonwealth. It is an honor for us to celebrate women of all communities who perform unheralded acts on a daily basis that make our homes, neighborhoods, cities, and towns better places to live.

The Commonwealth Heroines Class of 2026 are truly those who have kept the community together when we needed it the most. They may not always make the news, but they most assuredly make a difference. Commonwealth Heroines use their time, talent, spirit, and enthusiasm to enrich the lives of others in their community. They are mentors, volunteers, and innovators, the glue that keeps a community together. These women have been selected because they use their time, talent, spirit, and enthusiasm to enrich the lives of others. These acts of public leadership and volunteerism help advance the status of women and girls in Massachusetts in ways both big and small. **Their collective effort is meaningful and has a lasting impact.**

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all of our legislative partners who continue to recommend, recognize, and advance women within their districts. Each year, the MCSW partners with state legislators to identify women who make outstanding contributions to their organizations and in their communities. Elected officials are encouraged to submit one woman from their constituency as a means of recognizing their invaluable efforts and extraordinary acts of service.

It is a true honor when those who represent us not only see us but also actively put women forward to be honored and recognized for their service.

This year, the Class of 2026 Commonwealth Heroines comprises a historic 147 women from across the state, the largest class awarded to date by the MCSW. These women are leaders in industry, business, nonprofit, advocacy, and more, and their work truly makes a difference in our local communities all across the state.

As you read through stories celebrating your fellow community members, we know that their passion and dedication to making our Commonwealth a better place will move you. We're grateful to be able to celebrate with you here in person today and encourage you to use the hashtag #CH26 to congratulate those honored online, fostering the same community cultivated every year at the Commonwealth Heroines celebration.

Again, congratulations to the Class of 2026! Thank you for all your special efforts to make the Commonwealth a better place to live and work. We couldn't do this work without each and every one of you.

**The Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women**

COMMONWEALTH

# HEROINES

CLASS OF 2026



Lynne Abbott	Amy Epstein	Ruth Pino
Asmaa Abou-Fouda	Deborah Ann Eskenazi	Linda Polach
Susan Abramson	Laurel Farnsworth	Stacey Raffi
Xiomara Albán DeLobato	Jill Fearons	Leela Ramachandran
Edith Alexander	Lisa Feitelberg-Costa	Anna Winter Rasmussen
Abigail Allard	Barbara Fenby	Bonny Rathbone
Tina Alu	Devan Ferreira	Jenny Mello Reis
Francesca Arsenault	Nell Fields	Patricia Reppucci
Jill Ashton	Claire Freda	Rachel Resendes
Kaitlyn Baker	Patricia Freiss	Louise Rice
Denise Barbosa Lane	Rebecca Frias	Joanne Roche
Gayla Bartlett	Nancy Gardner	Jacquelyn Rose
Laurie Bent	Debra Garland	Sarah Rosenberg
Kerri Berry	Lisa Gibalerio	Britt Ruhe
Sophia Bethoney	Lorren Gibbons	Susan Runne
Maria Blasi	Rosemary Gill	Eileen Ryan
Meri Bond	Sasha Goodfriend	Carla Sarno
Anne Boris	Barbara Groover	Teresa Gentile Sauro
Cynthia Brogan	Edna Hall	Jenny Schwartz
Ellen Burns	Michelle Hamilton	Shannon Scully
Ann Cambra	Candice Hartford	Victoria Selser
Diane T. Chamberlain	Kim Hearst	Minnah B. Sheikh
Suchira Channoi	Karen Henderson	Karen Spencer
Susie Chhoun	Kristie Henriksen	Nancy Stehfest
Theresa Clawson	Theresa Hicks	Emily Stephens
Darby Connolly	Carol B. Hillman	Maura Sullivan
Dianne Connolly	Kelly Hitt	Karen Swindell
Grace Connolly	Lori Hooley	Katherine Tallman
Catrina Cooley-Flagg	Lori Hout	Theresa Thompson
Marcia Cooper	Andrea Howard	Nicola Truppin
Jeanne Craigie	Tanya Howard	Jeanette Velasquez
Ellen Crawford	Katherine Jackson	Tania Vitvitsky
Shareen Davis	Yvette Jarreau	Shannon Wall
Kate DiSanto	Audrey S. Jiménez	Lexi Walters Wright
Sarah Donnelly	Deborah Johnson	Heidi Wear
Andrea Dunne Adrian	Karen Johnston	Liz Wiley
Brynn Durno	Keyanna Jones	Bonnie Zahorik

## Commonwealth Heroine Awardees

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## **Diane T. Chamberlain, South Dennis**



Diane has spent decades protecting the health of Dennis residents and the environment of the Mid Cape. As a nurse with a Duke University degree, Diane built a career rooted in care, service, and responsibility, including roles at Massachusetts General Hospital and Boston Children's Hospital. She brought the same dedication home, serving Dennis as a public health leader, neighbor, and trusted presence. For more than two decades, Diane has served on the Dennis Board of Health, becoming a steady and respected advocate for public health, environmental stewardship, and thoughtful local decision-making.

Her most significant contribution has been her leadership on water quality and wastewater planning. Over years of service on the Wastewater Implementation Committee, including participation in hundreds of water quality planning meetings, Diane helped lay the foundation for the Town of Dennis to take on the vital work of watershed restoration and long-term water resource protection, and to pass a long-sought sewerage project. Diane's life and service reflect her professional skill, civic dedication, and personal commitment to her community. Diane is recognized not only for her many years of service, but also for her enduring role in helping make a cleaner, healthier future possible.

**Nominated by State Senator Julian Cyr**

## **Shareen Davis, Chatham**



Shareen is a 13th generation Cape Codder whose work has empowered women and strengthened her coastal community for decades. A commercial fisherwoman, business owner, and advocate, she has worked tirelessly alongside her family in the fishing industry. For over 30 years, Shareen has mentored women in a traditionally male dominated field, helping them navigate fisheries, leadership roles, and civic engagement. She was part of the Fishermen's Wives Coalition that secured a Congressional act to dredge Chatham Harbor, ensuring safe access to the fishing pier. She has served on the Chatham Select Board since 2017 and now works as kitchen and marketing manager of the Chatham Harvesters Cooperative, promoting sustainable fishing and supporting local fishermen. She serves as an outreach coordinator with the Massachusetts Fishermen's Partnership, assisting with safety, insurance, and advocacy. Through her photography and community work, she supports scholarships for children of fishing families and inspires connection through art, food, and storytelling. Her leadership reflects resilience, mentorship, and a deep commitment to community and sustainability.

**Co-nominated by State Representative Hadley Luddy & State Senator Julian Cyr**

## **Nell Fields, East Falmouth**



The Rev. Nell Fields has built a career defined by leadership, innovation, and service. A former editor and journalist, she spent much of her career as a publisher for a publicly traded newspaper company in Los Angeles before transitioning into executive roles in the technology and financial services sectors at Korn Ferry International and First Data Corporation.

For the past 15 years, Nell has served as minister at the Waquoit Congregational Church United Church of Christ in Falmouth. From the moment she joined the community, she committed herself to being more than a spiritual leader by actively convening conversations and initiatives that address local challenges and social justice issues.

Nell is deeply involved in community organizations, including the Falmouth Clergy Association, Upper Cape Interfaith Alliance, and No Place for Hate Falmouth. She serves on the advisory board for Belonging to Each Other, a program assisting individuals experiencing homelessness, and contributes to Neighborhood Falmouth and the Falmouth Service Center, where she chairs the Community Engagement and Inclusion Committee. She holds degrees in journalism, English, and divinity, and is also the author of two method patents. Nell's work reflects a lifelong commitment to innovation, inclusion, and community building.

**Nominated by State Representative David Vieira**

## Emily Stephens, Marstons Mills

Emily Stephens exemplifies resilience, compassion, and service. She is a proud American, a devoted parent, a lifelong Cape Codder, and a trusted friend to so many in her community. Service is deeply rooted in her family—her father served as a police chief, and her life reflects those same values of dedication and integrity.



Emily's life was forever changed when her husband, Brent, a paramedic who dedicated his career to saving others, tragically passed away unexpectedly while at work. Faced with profound loss, Emily chose strength. She continues to move forward with grace and determination, raising her son, Cooper, with love, resilience, and a strong sense of service to others. Emily gives back every day. She donates blood, helps distribute food and clothing to those in need, and consistently supports others without hesitation or recognition. Her kindness is genuine, constant, and always offered with a smile.

An avid runner, Emily has run every single day for more than three consecutive years, a powerful symbol of discipline and perseverance. She also leads Team Big Nick, a charity road race team honoring the memory of United States Marine Corporal Nicholas G. Xiarhos, who lost his life in Afghanistan. Through this effort, Emily honors our fallen heroes while building community and purpose. Emily Stephens does not seek praise—she simply serves. I am proud to nominate her not only as a State Representative, but as her friend. She is truly deserving of this honor.

Nominated by State Representative Steven G. Xiarhos

## BERKSHIRE COUNTY

### Abigail Allard, Pittsfield

Abigail “Abby” Allard is a steadfast champion for girls and women through her tireless work as Development and Communications Manager at the Gladys Allen Brigham Community Center in Pittsfield. Since joining the Brigham Center in 2019, Abby has become an integral force within the organization and a respected leader in the local nonprofit community. During the pandemic, she proved to be an extraordinary asset, stepping up to lead emergency childcare programming during an unprecedented and uncertain time. In the years since, she has fully embraced her role and continues to flourish. In her professional partnerships, volunteer efforts, and community relationships, Abby brings her full self to everything she does. Beyond her work at the Center, she serves on the Berkshire Leadership Program Steering Committee and the Pittsfield Cultural Council, and she runs the Berkshire Boxing Academy. She is a Berkshire County 40 Under 40 honoree, a 2025 iBerkshires Community Hero, and a multi-year nominee for the Under-40 Changemaker award. Abby has made a deep and lasting impact on countless girls and women across her community. She leads with an unwavering commitment to empowerment and wellbeing, embodying what it truly means to be a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Tricia Farley-Bouvier



### Patti Messina, Cheshire

I'm pleased to nominate Patti Messina, Executive Director of the Northern Berkshire United Way, as a Commonwealth Heroine. Her unwavering commitment to strengthening families and uplifting the most vulnerable residents of Northern Berkshire is remarkable. Through her leadership, the organization has expanded access to essential resources, such as food security programs, early childhood initiatives, and financial stability services, ensuring that individuals and families not only meet immediate needs but also build long-term stability. Patti's collaborative approach, bringing together nonprofits, local businesses, schools, and volunteers, has fostered a culture of generosity and shared responsibility across the region. Her tireless advocacy, compassionate leadership, and measurable impact on the community exemplify the spirit of service and dedication that the Commonwealth Heroine Award is meant to recognize.

Nominated by State Representative John Barrett



### **Alison Peters, Hinsdale**



Alison has been an important member of the community for Dalton and the surrounding hill towns for the past sixteen years as the Executive Director of the Dalton Community Recreation Association. The Dalton CRA is a hub of activity for the region, offering many crucial services in a region often overlooked and forgotten by Boston. Alison has successfully steered the Dalton CRA through a pandemic, through a 100-year anniversary milestone, through a serious change in funding and sponsorship reliability as the economic base of the region has shifted, and through an ever-changing regional identity profile. Alison has kept the Dalton CRA, and the important programming provided at the CRA, strong and thriving in spite of all of these challenges by building long-lasting new partnerships, adapting to the changing needs of the community, and driving home the importance of celebrating our community milestones. She has remained a true unsung heroine, never seeking the spotlight for herself, instead raising up others. Alison deserves our highest thanks and recognition for the amazing work she has done to improve the lives of so many!

Nominated by State Senator Paul Mark

### **Jenny Schwartz, Great Barrington**



Jenny is the Operations Manager and Volunteer Coordinator at Berkshire Bounty, a nonprofit focused on creatively advancing community food security through food rescue and delivery. She is deeply involved in behind-the-scenes work for local food access across Berkshire County, especially uplifting the food needs of low-income and immigrant communities. She hosts educational cooking sessions with an emphasis on local, seasonal food, and facilitates Food Collab meetings across the Berkshires to bring organizations together and work on finding solutions to food insecurity. Her vital work supports community-building, food access, and justice in the Berkshires.

Nominated by State Representative Leigh Davis

## **BRISTOL COUNTY**

### **Denise Barbosa Lane, North Easton**



Denise Barbosa Lane is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Raising Multicultural Kids (RMK), an education-based nonprofit dedicated to increasing racial, cultural, and anti-bias competency in schools and communities, preparing students for a diverse workforce and global economy. RMK's mission is to ensure each child sees themselves modeled in curriculum, in teachers, and in leadership roles, and was given the Kathleen Roberts Creative Leadership Award by the MTA. As an innovative change maker, Denise has touched lives in our community, and she was honored by Boston Women's Fund as one of 40 Liberation Leaders who have contributed toward racial, gender, economic, and social justice. Denise holds a BS from the University of Massachusetts at Boston in Management with a double concentration in Finance and Marketing with an MBA from Simmons School of Management. Her dedication to community and equity shines through in every role she takes on.

Nominated by State Senator William Driscoll

### **Cynthia Brogan, Taunton**



When I think about unsung heroines in our community, I think of Cindy Brogan. She is a beacon of inspiration, compassion, and leadership who has dedicated her life to our community. Born in New Bedford, she graduated from Bridgewater State and entered the US Army, serving with distinction as a Captain. Upon leaving the Army in 1973, she welcomed her first child and began a long and meaningful career in education. She worked for 18 years as a Special Education teacher in Westport, welcomed twins, and served as her Union's President. She later served as the Special Education Director at Bristol-Plymouth Regional Technical School. Retirement has not slowed Cindy down. She supports the Taunton Diversity Network, the Taunton Animal Shelter, VFW Post 61, Boston Children's Hospital, the Greater Boston Food Bank, the Epilepsy Foundation, and more. A breast cancer survivor, Cindy is an ardent supporter of the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life. Last year, she co-chaired "Flower Power," raising \$1,000 to benefit female vets. The breadth and depth of her activism is inspiring. Cindy is our example of compassion and community. She is our Unsung Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Lisa Field



### **Lisa Feitelberg-Costa, Westport**

Lisa founded Stroke Buddies & Friends. Its mission statement is: Facing our challenges together, embracing our new normal. Today, the group has more than 100 members. The group meets monthly at the Westport Council on Aging. Anyone who experiences life-altering health challenges, whether or not they result from a stroke, is welcome. She is also a very active member of the Westport Disability Commission.

Nominated by State Representative Steven Ouellette

### **Rebecca Frias, Assonet**

Rebecca Frias has served as Director of the Freetown Council on Aging since 2023 and, in that short time, has transformed the department's energy and reach. Under her leadership, the COA has expanded critical services, such as the "Brown Bag" Food Program, operated in partnership with the Greater Boston Food Bank, which provides drive-up and delivery groceries to community members in need. She has also introduced a wide range of new senior programs, from yoga and fitness classes to brick-oven pizza parties and senior-focused health initiatives—ensuring both care and connection for Freetown's aging population. Prior to becoming director, Rebecca was a licensed social worker, providing compassionate counseling to patients and families navigating cancer. She earned her undergraduate degree from Roger Williams University and a Master of Science in Social Work from Columbia University. A devoted wife and mother of two, Rebecca is known not only for her professional accomplishments but for her genuine kindness and warmth, which she brings to every interaction. She truly embodies the values of a Massachusetts Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Carole Fiola

### **Rosemary Gill, Dartmouth**

Rosemary Gill is the President and CEO of the Zeiterion Theatre (The Z), where she has devoted nearly two decades to stewarding one of the South Coast's most treasured cultural landmarks. Over the past ten years, she led the transformative \$37 million restoration and renovation of the beloved 100-year-old theater—an ambitious project preserving its historic character while positioning it for a vibrant new century. Under her leadership, The Z has strengthened both its artistic reach and its economic impact. A Dartmouth native, Rosemary has worked in New Bedford for most of her adult life and cares deeply about the community she calls home. She and her husband, Michael, have been married for 39 years and share two children and four grandchildren. Rosemary joined The Z in 2007 as Assistant Director, was promoted to Executive Director in 2013, and became President and CEO in 2022. Her leadership has earned recognition from national and regional arts funders, as well as numerous community awards for advancing cultural life in the region.

Nominated by State Representative Antonio Cabral

### **Michelle Hamilton, Foxborough**

Michelle Hamilton, an Army veteran, brings a deep sense of service and leadership to her role as Director of Foxborough's Veterans' Services Department. Her military background gives her a personal understanding of the sacrifices made by service members and their families, as well as the challenges many veterans face after returning home. In addition to her service in the Army, Michelle has been a longtime member of Rolling Thunder MA Chapter 2, a nonprofit organization dedicated to honoring prisoners of war and those missing in action. Her continued involvement reflects her strong commitment to supporting and advocating for veterans beyond her own time in uniform. In her role, Michelle's mission is centered on ensuring veterans receive the support, benefits, and recognition they deserve. She assists returning Massachusetts veterans in applying for state wartime bonuses and helps disabled veterans and Gold Star families apply for annuities. She guides veterans through disability claims with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and administers Chapter 115 assistance to eligible veterans and their families. Additionally, she connects veterans with education, training, and employment resources, provides counseling and referrals, and educates them on available services. Through her work, Michelle is committed to strengthening the veteran community and integrating veterans into the fabric of Foxborough.

Nominated by State Representative Michael Chaisson



## Keyanna Jones, New Bedford



Keyanna Jones is a dedicated young leader from New Bedford whose work reflects a deep commitment to public service, civic engagement, and data-driven policy. Currently a student at Columbia College of Columbia University, she is pursuing a degree in Political Science and Government while also studying Statistics. Even while in college, Keyanna has already built an impressive record of leadership and service. She serves on the Board of Directors for Women's Fund SouthCoast as a member of its Grants Committee, helping guide strategic decisions that support programs benefiting women and girls across the region. Her commitment to civic participation began early. While attending New Bedford High School, where she was part of the Academy of Honors, Keyanna served as Vice Chair of the Student Advisory Council and a member of the Southeast Regional Student Advisory Council. She continues to serve her community as Co-Chair of the Mayor's Youth Council and as an election worker through the NB Votes Youth Empowerment Program. Keyanna represents the next generation of civic leadership, combining academic excellence, community engagement, and a passion for creating equitable opportunities for others.

Nominated by State Representative Christopher Hendricks

## Frances Kelley, Swansea



Frances has devoted decades of service to her community, demonstrating exceptional leadership and volunteerism that have significantly improved the lives of residents. Since 1995, Frances has served on numerous town committees, including the Beach Facilities Committee, the Advisory & Finance Committee, and the Public Access Oversight Committee, the Library Building Planning Committee and the 350th Town Celebration Committee. She has also served for many years as an Election Worker and as a member of the Cable Advisory Committee. She is a respected and steady leader, known for her ability to guide thoughtful discussion and lead with fairness and vision. Frances embodies the spirit of civic engagement through her mentorship of others, encouragement of community participation, and advocacy for positive change, making her an inspiring role model for women and girls across her community. Her countless years of unwavering dedication, selflessness, and steadfast commitment to service exemplify the true qualities of a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Steven Howitt

## Leslie Kola, Raynham



Leslie Kola and Alda Stankewicz, co-owners of Annie's Book Stop, have become pillars of the Raynham community since taking ownership of the beloved bookstore in 2025. They have continued its long-standing tradition of promoting literacy, education, and community connection, transforming the space into a warm and welcoming hub. Through free community nights, story times, and the inclusion of locally made goods, they have created an environment that celebrates both creativity and togetherness. Beyond the bookstore, Leslie and Alda have demonstrated a deep commitment to service. They actively volunteer in local schools, supporting teachers, students, and families, and contribute their time to numerous community initiatives. In just over a decade as residents of Raynham, Leslie and Alda have made a lasting and meaningful impact. Their dedication, generosity, and community spirit truly embody what it means to be a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative David Gallagher

## Wendy Morill, New Bedford



Wendy single-handedly organized a grassroots campaign to fight a national company seeking to expand its business at the expense of a healthy, quiet, and safe neighborhood in the North End of New Bedford, MA. Everyone involved, from the delegation to the board of health, relied on her expertise and passion. Wendy exemplifies what hard work, dedication, and expertise can do to preserve a community.

Nominated by State Representative Christopher Markey



### **Jenny Mello Reis, Somerset**

Jenny Mello is deeply committed to her community, generously volunteering her time and expertise wherever needed. Whether serving at local food pantries, supporting seniors through the Council on Aging, organizing community events, or helping with youth softball leagues, she consistently shows up with kindness and dedication. She is an active member of the Rotary Club, where she participates in fundraisers and initiatives that directly support local residents and strengthen the community.

**Nominated by State Representative Justin Thurber**



### **Rachel Resendes, Fall River**

Rachel runs Damien's Place Food Pantry in Wareham. She has been a stalwart in the community, not only in Wareham but in her hometown of Fall River. Currently, Rachel volunteers in a variety of community activities, including serving as a member of the Rotary Club of Fall River (Diplomatic Ambassador for Foreign Exchange), the MITI Advisory Development Board, the Diman Regional Vocational Technical High School Carpentry Advisory Board, the United Neighbors Advisory Board of Directors, and as a Youth Court Judge. Through her work with Damien's Place, she serves those experiencing homelessness and food insecurity. Rachel has left an indelible mark on the Wareham community and continues to raise the bar for community service.

**Nominated by State Representative John R. Gaskey**



### **Joanne Roche, Mansfield**

Joanne is the Clinic Manager at Four Women Health Services in Attleboro, where she has dedicated over a decade to overseeing billing operations and office management. She has played a vital role in ensuring the clinic runs efficiently while maintaining a patient-centered focus. Recently, Joanne successfully secured grant funding to enhance clinic safety and services, leading to renovations that have created a more secure, welcoming, and comfortable environment for both patients and staff. Deeply committed to expanding access to reproductive healthcare, Joanne collaborates with local and national organizations to support patients nationwide. In addition to her work within the clinic, she is a strong advocate for reproductive rights in Massachusetts, using her experience and voice to support continued access to care. Joanne is also a devoted mother of four, serving as a constant source of inspiration through her resilience and dedication. She demonstrated extraordinary strength while caring for her husband, Joe, during his battle with amyloidosis until his passing in 2016, all while continuing her full-time responsibilities. Even in challenging times, she remains steadfast in her commitment to her work, her family, and the patients she serves. It is an honor to nominate Joanne as a 2026 Heroine.

**Nominated by State Representative James K. Hawkins**

## Gayla Bartlett, Danvers



Gayla Bartlett exemplifies the very spirit of a Commonwealth Heroine through her unwavering dedication to service, community, and connection. Gayla is deeply involved with Danvers Community Access Television, which has been providing video and media production tools to the Town of Danvers for over 25 years. As the host of Lead On, Gayla interviews local leaders and community members on how they make a difference in the Danvers community. With over 50 episodes, Gayla has created a space for strengthened civic engagement and meaningful dialogue. Gayla Bartlett is also a long-time member of Kiwanis, a global service organization focused on improving communities through volunteering, fundraising, and service projects. She is currently the Kiwanis District Public Relations Coordinator. Alongside her efforts in the community, Gayla has also made a positive impact on students in Danvers through her past leadership as the President of the Danvers Educational Enrichment Partnership and through her work with DanversCARES, a dynamic community-based coalition focused on positive youth development. Gayla is such a pillar of the Danvers community, and her leadership and commitment to helping those in need will be felt for decades to come.

Nominated by State Representative Sally Kerans

## Anne Boris, Salem



For more than four decades, Anne Boris has been a supporter and volunteer at the Northeast Arc with her late husband, John. After first purchasing a weighted blanket for \$250, she learned how to make them and donate them to families who could not afford to buy one. She has made more than 500 weighted blankets for those with autism and developmental disabilities. Anne and John were heavily involved in the community and became active members in several organizations throughout the years. Anne cared for John in his last few years of life, and her dedication to her husband and her community makes her a resolute Heroine, someone who does things behind the scenes, rarely receiving recognition but having made the lives of individuals so much better over the course of a lifetime. Thank you Anne for being who you are – a true Heroine for the Massachusetts State Senate and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Essex District.

Nominated by State Senator Joan B. Lovely

## Darby Connolly, Lynn



Darby has been a dedicated member of the Boys & Girls Club of Lynn since 2018 and Director of Club Operations and Camp Director. A 2021 graduate of UMass Amherst with a degree in Biology and Psychology, Darby brings both knowledge and passion to her work. She has transformed the member experience through creative, mission-driven programming and strong leadership. Under her direction, the Drop-In and teen center has expanded tremendously, and Camp Creighton has become a sold-out, in-demand program. Darby's work across education, wellness, sports, and the arts ensures meaningful growth for hundreds of children. Darby leads a team of 20-40 employees with care and intention, creating a positive culture that drives high staff retention and morale. Beyond operations, Darby is a trusted mentor to youth, expanding opportunities through career exploration, college tours, and individualized support for members in need. Darby leads with heart, humility, and excellence. Her impact is felt daily by hundreds of youth and staff, making her truly deserving of recognition.

Nominated by State Representative Daniel Cahill



## **Dianne Connolly, Haverhill**



Dianne is a truly dedicated and passionate member of the Haverhill Public School community, whose commitment to student success is at the heart of everything she does. She understands that every child deserves the opportunity to thrive, and she pours her energy and enthusiasm into ensuring that each student has the support and resources they need to reach their full potential. But Dianne's care doesn't stop at the classroom door—she is deeply invested in the overall success and growth of the entire Haverhill Public School system, working tirelessly to help build an environment where students, teachers, and staff can all flourish together. Her unwavering dedication, warm spirit, and genuine love for the Haverhill community make her an invaluable asset, and her positive impact can be felt throughout every corner of the school system. Haverhill Public Schools, and our community as a whole, are truly better because of Dianne Connolly.

**Nominated by State Representative Ryan Hamilton**

## **Grace Connolly, Newburyport**



Born in Santiago, Cuba, Grace immigrated to the United States with her family in 1961, after the Cuban Revolution. She has resided in Newburyport since 1984, and is the proud mother of three grown daughters. Grace is a partner of one of Newburyport's oldest and most respected law firms in the city, Connolly & Connolly. She received her doctorate from the University of Florida, College of Law in Gainesville, Florida, and graduated magna cum laude from Florida State University. She is a member of the United States Court of Appeals for the 11th Circuit, the Massachusetts Bar Association, the Florida Bar Association and the Academy of Elder Law Attorneys. She has provided legal services, pro bono, to establish several charitable foundations that serve the community. This includes the Anna Jaques Community Foundation, which was merged with the hospital's operations in 2021 to strengthen fundraising efforts. Grace was named Chair of the Anna Jaques Hospital Board of Trustees in 2021, the first woman to hold this position.

**Nominated by State Representative Dawne Shand**

## **Ellen Crawford, Lynnfield**



Ellen's contributions to her community and volunteer work exemplifies the high standards and exceptional qualities that define a Commonwealth Heroine. A resident of Lynnfield for 44 years, Ellen has actively participated in grassroots campaigns supporting the Market Street development and Lynnfield school building projects and is a member of the Lynnfield Historic Committee and a longtime supporter of the Lynnfield Senior Center and Lynnfield Public Library. As a member of the Lynnfield Village Home & Garden Club and Townscape (the Lynnfield Beautification Group), Ellen has led and supported projects including tree plantings, playground cleanups, and other community enhancement efforts. Ellen's community involvement extends to Lynnfield's public schools and athletics. A PTO President and member from 1991-2009, Ellen led and organized fundraising initiatives supporting media center renovations, playground equipment upgrades, and educational resources.

She also promoted student and staff morale through community engagement initiatives and directed fundraising efforts to support Lynnfield High School student-athletes as the Vice President of the Lynnfield Athletic Association. An active parishioner at Saint Maria Goretti Parish for 44 years, Ellen has also served as a religious education teacher, 35 years as a volunteer with My Brother's Table through her parish, and as a youth sports coach. Ellen is a member of the Massachusetts Association of Realtors and the National Association of Realtors who gives back to Lynnfield by donating a percentage of each transaction to the community. She was previously appointed by Governor Charlie Baker to the Massachusetts Home Ownership Advisory Committee. Ellen is a recipient of the Daniel Townsend Award for Excellence for her contributions to the Lynnfield community and the Greater Lynn Chamber of Commerce's Town Pride Award.

**Nominated by State Representative Bradley H. Jones, Jr.**

## Deborah Ann Eskenazi, Peabody

Debby's deep commitment to her hometown is reflected in decades of heartfelt service. Her journey of giving back began while raising her family, where she stepped into leadership roles as President of the Carroll School PTO and Co-President of the Peabody High School Performing Arts parent group. Since retiring from the Northshore Education Consortium in 2012, Debby has dedicated her time to bettering the community she loves. Her volunteerism spans a wide range of compassion-filled causes. She provides a comforting presence as a cuddler for newborns in the Special Unit at Salem Hospital and brings creative joy to residents in memory and long-term care at Chelsea Jewish Lifecare. Her hands-on work at Citizens Inn, assisting in the pantry and mentoring neighbors in their career journeys, shows that she cares as much about a person's future as she does their next meal. Debby is also a passionate advocate for Peabody's heritage, serving on the boards of the Peabody Historical Society and the Historical Commission, where she helped launch the Commercial Historical Plaque Program. Whether she is supporting the Peabody Garden Club, the Sutton House, or fundraising for Bridgewell, Debby's efforts are always rooted in a genuine desire to help others. Honored with the 2025 Mary Upton Ferrin Award, Debby remains a true inspiration. A neighbor whose quiet, passionate dedication makes Peabody a warmer, kinder place for everyone.

Nominated by State Representative Thomas Walsh

## Devan Ferreira, Haverhill

Devan embodies what it means to be a Commonwealth Heroine through her sustained commitment to her community and her willingness to go above and beyond in service to others. As a Haverhill City Councilor, she approaches her role not simply as an elected official, but as a neighbor, advocate, and problem-solver who shows up consistently for her constituents. Beyond her formal role, Devan has taken meaningful action to address urgent community needs, including helping to establish a winter warming center to support unhoused residents during the coldest months. This effort reflects her compassion, leadership, and ability to mobilize resources when her community needs it most. Her involvement spans numerous local organizations, from agriculture and housing advocacy to education and inclusion, demonstrating a holistic commitment to strengthening Haverhill. Whether she is organizing, advocating, or lending a helping hand, Devan leads with purpose and heart. She represents the very best of public service, making a tangible difference in people's lives each and every day.

Nominated by State Senator Pavel Payano

## Kim Hearst, North Andover

Kim has dedicated her life to improving her community. Kim has been the co-president of the North Andover High School Parent Advisory Council, the treasurer of the North Andover Music Association, a volunteer with the North Andover High School theater guild, and a member of the Save Our Senior Party committee. She is a volunteer with the Scouts Troop 87 and 89 and spends many days working in the Giving Garden at Rolling Ridge. She was also previously on the board of the Community Co-op Preschool. She currently works as Neighbors In Need's Financial Coordinator and has served in similar roles at North Andover Community Access and Media and the YMCA.

Nominated by State Representative Adrienne Ramos



### **Audrey S. Jiménez, Lynn**

Audrey S. Jimenez has dedicated her life to expanding opportunity for others. A natural bridge builder, Audrey has strengthened belonging in classrooms, boardrooms, pews, and the community. After a successful career with American Airlines, Audrey became a Spanish teacher at St. Mary's in Lynn. She went on to serve as Executive Director of the Lynn YMCA for over a decade, impacting generations of families. Audrey returned to St. Mary's as Director of Multicultural Affairs and today serves as the school's Director of College and Career Counseling. Among her proudest initiatives is her mentorship of Ukrainian students who arrived during a time of global crisis. For nearly two decades, she has been active at St. Mary of the Sacred Heart Parish, including service as a Mass lector. She has also served on Lynn's Human Rights Commission for many years, including as Past Chair, and on multiple civic boards. While studying at the University of Connecticut, Audrey studied abroad in Mexico City, a transformational experience that helped define her identity and led to fluency in Spanish. A lifelong learner, she recently earned a Master's degree in Education from Boston College and an Advanced Graduate Certificate from Assumption College. At the center of her life are her two adult children and grandchild, who remain her greatest joy. Audrey has navigated loss, reinvention, leadership, and transition with integrity. She has stood in rooms where her voice was not always the loudest, but often the most necessary, consistently choosing principle over comfort and service over recognition.

**Nominated by State Representative Sean Reid**

### **Wendy Joseph, Lynn**

Wendy Joseph is a dedicated cultural leader in the City of Lynn whose work focuses on preserving history, fostering creativity, and strengthening community engagement. She currently serves as a Museum Curator at the Grand Army of the Republic Hall & Museum, where she brings Lynn's rich Civil War-era history to life through thoughtful curation and educational programming. With over 15 years of experience in design, styling, and the creative arts, Wendy has worked across artistic, nonprofit, and community-based spaces, translating complex ideas into meaningful visual and educational experiences. Her work reflects a strong commitment to collaboration, innovation, and accessibility in the arts. In addition to her curatorial role, Wendy is the owner of Wendy Joseph Designs, where she applies her creative expertise to a range of projects that highlight storytelling through design. She is known for her ability to connect people, build partnerships, and deliver impactful work that resonates with diverse audiences.

Wendy is also deeply engaged in community-centered initiatives that uplift local history and cultural awareness. She has played an active role in organizing and supporting the annual Frederick Douglass "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" reading, helping to ensure this important reflection on history and justice remains a visible and meaningful tradition in Lynn. She has been involved in North Shore Juneteenth efforts and broader cultural programming that celebrates Black history and community resilience. Additionally, she has collaborated on local historical projects, including the Frederick Douglass Park and memorial plaque, further demonstrating her commitment to preserving and honoring Lynn's diverse historical narrative. Through her dedication to both history and the arts, Wendy continues to enrich the cultural landscape of Lynn and inspire deeper community connection.

**Nominated by State Senator Brendan Crighton**

### **Lori Marendal-Lang, Salem**

Lori is a Salem High School History Teacher, Board Member for the Mental Health Makeover, a member of the Salem High School Building Committee, and active participant with the League of Women Voters. She cares deeply for her students and has had an immeasurable impact on the students she has taught. Salem High School is lucky to have educators like her, and her advocacy, paired with her deep love for Salem, makes our city, and as a result, our Commonwealth, better as a whole.

**Nominated by State Representative Manny Cruz**

## **Nancy Marino, Beverly**



Nancy is a tireless champion for her neighbors' quality of life, leading important work as a volunteer member of Beverly's Housing Authority, Parks and Recreation Commission, Community Preservation Committee, Youth Collaborative Board, Ward 2 Civic Association, and many other boards, committees, and forms of civic engagement. By showing up consistently to represent her neighbors where decisions are being made, Nancy has been a driving force behind countless programs that make Beverly the special, welcoming, active community it is. These include the establishment and expansion of the Myles McPherson Youth Center, Greg's League Unified Basketball, making parks and open spaces accessible to all, and investing in historic preservation projects, expanded affordable housing options, and a walkable downtown and waterfront. Nancy is always watching out for which members of our community may not be "at the table" and helps to bring in more perspectives. Nancy's honest, authentic, humble voice helps bring clarity to the purpose of public projects, and she is always ready to roll up her sleeves and help turn talk into action. And although she never seeks credit or congratulations for her work, Nancy's neighbors recognize and appreciate the many ways she has enriched our community.

**Nominated by State Representative Hannah Bowen**

## **Christina Minicucci, North Andover**



Christina tirelessly works for all of the Merrimack Valley, whether it is as a board member of the Greater Lawrence Community Action Council, or in her role as the Director of Development at MEVA Transit, where she works hard to shape an organization that delivers much-needed services to the area. Christina also served as a State Representative for the 14th Essex District, during which time she was a tireless advocate for protecting women. She has worked as a rape crisis counselor and served on the board of the YWCA, a true advocate for advancing and protecting women at all levels.

**Nominated by State Senator Barry R. Finegold**

## **Erin Padilla, Haverhill**



Erin is a pillar of support. As the Director of Creative Haverhill, she has championed the arts and culture programming in the city. Haverhill's Art Walk - and our very first pride parade - were supported by Erin through fundraising, coordination, and outreach. She has been integral to renovating the old Cogswell school in Bradford to transform it into an art space for artists and children. With her, Haverhill has been flourishing, and we are lucky to have her.

**Nominated by State Representative Andres X. Vargas**

## **Ruth Pino, Gloucester**



Ruth Pino is a respected and very active real estate professional on Cape Ann, but she always finds the time and energy to support important initiatives for the community. She has been active in the Cape Ann Community Foundation, which initiated the Cape Ann License plate and distributes grants for the proceeds it generates, and as a Past President of the Gloucester Rotary Club she continues to raise funds for Rotary scholarships and other community projects. In memory of her late husband, she worked with the Gloucester Education Foundation to build a carpentry annex at Gloucester High School. Most recently, she was instrumental in the revitalization and relocation of the Gloucester Vietnam War Memorial and is a regular volunteer in annual efforts to install a moving flag display on Gloucester's Stacey Boulevard for the summer season.

**Nominated by State Senator Bruce Tarr**



### **Shannon Scully, Andover**

Shannon Scully is a former Chair of the Andover School Committee, where she led initiatives to improve public education and guide major school facility projects through her six years of service. With a professional background in engineering and tech leadership, Shannon has been an active community member in Andover since 2011, dedicated to advancing educational excellence and civic engagement. Shannon now serves as the Director of School Business Services for the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, where she continues her career to support the students of the Commonwealth.

Nominated by State Representative Frank Moran



### **Nancy Stehfest, S. Hamilton**

Nancy Stehfest's life work has been to help people. She worked for the Commonwealth Health Insurance Connector Authority for many years, most recently as Senior Manager of the Appeals Unit, connecting people to health coverage. Even after her recent retirement, she has continued to help individuals find the coverage they need.

Nominated by State Representative Kristin Kassner

### **Heidi Whear, Swampscott**

Heidi Sawyer Whear, MPH, is a dedicated leader and advocate for older adults who has transformed the way seniors are supported in Swampscott and across the North Shore. As Director of Aging Services in her hometown, Heidi brings both professional expertise and deep personal commitment to ensuring residents can age with dignity, independence, and connection. A graduate of Boston University School of Public Health, she has spent her career developing and expanding innovative programs in home settings, adult day health, affordable housing, and assisted living, always focused on improving quality of life for older adults and individuals living with dementia. Heidi's impact extends well beyond her formal role. She served on Swampscott's Council on Aging and the Swampscott for All Ages Committee, helping identify the urgent need for coordinated aging-in-place services as the senior population grows. In response, she became the founding president of Seaglass Village, a nonprofit that now supports seniors in Marblehead, Nahant, and Swampscott with rides to medical appointments, help with household tasks, social programming, and meaningful connection. Through grant funding and reduced-cost memberships, she has ensured that financial barriers do not prevent vulnerable women and seniors from receiving support. A lifelong volunteer and community builder — and Peace Corp alum — Heidi exemplifies the spirit of a Commonwealth Heroine: strengthening community, empowering older women, and helping residents truly grow older together.

Co-nominated by State Representative Jenny Armini and Senator Brendan Crighton



### **Bonnie Zahorik, Andover**

We are honored to nominate Bonnie Zahorik of Andover as a Commonwealth Heroine in recognition of her exceptional leadership, initiative, and dedication to expanding opportunity for women and young people. Bonnie has been a driving force behind A Better Chance of Andover, a 100% scholarship-based program that empowers young women of color to access rigorous educational opportunities and develop as leaders. She served as a volunteer Board Member, President and Board Chair from 2021 to 2024, and now continues her service on the Operating Board as Academic Co-Chair, helping to guide the program and support its scholars. Bonnie has also worked with community members and donors to expand scholarship opportunities that make higher education more accessible and reduce financial barriers for the young women who are alumni of the ABC program. In addition, she served on the Andover Town Finance Committee for 5 years, where she contributed her financial expertise and helped strengthen women's representation in local government. Through her leadership, mentorship, and service, Bonnie has made a lasting impact on her community and helped uplift the next generation of women leaders.

Nominated by State Representative Tram Nguyen



## FRANKLIN COUNTY

### **Carol B. Hillman, New Salem**

98-year-old Carol Hillman has achieved a lifetime of service and commitment to advancing childhood education in her community. During her twenty years as an early childhood educator, she developed a philosophy of experiential learning that has since influenced the next generation of young educators in the field. Her career continued as a consultant, teacher of early childhood educators, and author of books and articles that provide invaluable scholarship to the field of early childhood education.



Since 1978, she has been the owner of her own farm, currently known as New Salem Preserves and Heritage Cider. In 2019, at age 92, she added alcoholic cider to the farm's inventory, made from the apples on her property. She has explained that the core of her mission at the farm is to share the experience there with others. She attracts tourists from across the state and beyond to her orchards, where patrons are known to relax outside and enjoy the view of the Quabbin Reservoir.

The farm has also been an extension of her classroom and a manifestation of her passion for teaching, as she explains "The farm has been a place for kids and parents to learn. It's a place to learn a work ethic and how to look to the land and learn to take care of it." She especially enjoys hosting school groups at the farm, where she teaches students the importance of growing, processing, and harvesting food.

At almost 100 years old, she continues to live and work at the farm, committing her ninetieth decade to sharing the fruits of her labor with the community. She wakes up every day ready to greet her customers and provide the best possible experience for them. Carol has no intentions of stopping anytime soon, and her commitment to community investment and education has never shined brighter.

Nominated by State Representative Aaron Saunders

## HAMPDEN COUNTY

### **Xiomara Albán DeLobato, Wilbraham**

Xiomara Albán DeLobato is a respected leader in economic development and public service, currently serving as Vice President and Chief of Staff for the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council (EDC). In this role, she contributes to strategic initiatives that promote sustained capital investment, workforce growth, and regional economic vitality throughout Western Massachusetts.



With more than a decade of experience across the public, private, and higher education sectors, Xiomara has demonstrated a longstanding commitment to advancing equitable access to economic and academic opportunity. She is a Springfield native and the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants. The challenges faced by her parents in their careers strengthened her commitment to break down barriers and support marginalized communities.

Her professional experience includes leadership roles at multiple institutions of higher education, as well as public service with the Office of Springfield Mayor Domenic Sarno and the Office of U.S. Congressman Richard E. Neal. Her civic leadership extends to board service with Girls Inc. of the Valley and the Springfield Public Forum, and as a trustee of Veritas Prep Charter School.

Xiomara is truly deserving of recognition as a Commonwealth Heroine. She has demonstrated her ability to unite people from the public and private sectors to create a strong economy with opportunities for a better life for everyone. – State Representative Angelo J. Puppolo, Jr.

Nominated by State Representative Angelo J. Puppolo Jr.

## Jynai McDonald, Springfield

Jynai McDonald is a Springfield, Massachusetts native and the Founding CEO of Urban Impact Initiative Massachusetts, a community-based nonprofit with a social enterprise model dedicated to prioritizing the impact of poverty for families throughout Massachusetts by education, economic empowerment, and health equity. Since launching her work, Jynai has been committed to organizing, advocacy, and direct service that strengthens families and expands access to essential resources.



Jynai began her formal organizing journey through the Western Massachusetts Chapter of Neighbor to Neighbor, where she developed a deep foundation in grassroots leadership and community mobilization. Much of her career has centered on equity-driven leadership roles, including serving as the former Family Child Care Coordinator for SEIU Local 509, where she led representation, training, and support services for approximately 2,400 family child care providers across Massachusetts. She later continued advancing equity in early education as the Officer of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the Common Start Coalition, a statewide partnership working to make high-quality child care affordable and accessible for all families.

Through Urban Impact Initiative Massachusetts, Jynai has expanded programming that addresses urgent needs while investing in long-term community development. Urban Impact's work includes direct community support initiatives, youth development and family-focused programming, women in recovery support programs, re-entry programs with a hyper focus on women of color, and seasonal emergency response efforts—most notably Urban Impact's leadership in seasonal shelter work, ensuring unhoused residents have access to warmth, safety, and dignity during the winter months.

**Nominated by State Senator Adam Gomez**

## Charlene M. Naylor, Springfield

Overseer Charlene Naylor has been selected for the 2026 Commonwealth Heroine Award in recognition of her lifelong, unwavering commitment to service, spiritual leadership, and community uplift in Springfield. For nearly four decades, Overseer Naylor has embodied servant leadership; building Holy Redeemer Church from the basement of her home into a sanctuary of hope, stability, and transformation for countless families. Her service has always extended far beyond the walls of her church. Overseer Naylor has fed, clothed, and sheltered those in need, often sacrificing her own resources to ensure that no one was turned away. She has counseled individuals through crisis, supported young mothers, and created spaces where women could learn, heal, and grow. Her founding of the Deborah Transitional House stands as a testament to her belief that every woman deserves safety, dignity, and a path forward.



A teacher, organizer, and visionary, Overseer Naylor has trained generations of ministers, led women's departments at both the local and national levels, and strengthened families through programs designed to nurture love, responsibility, and spiritual grounding. All of this she accomplished while raising ten children, supporting her husband's ministry, and working tirelessly, often at multiple jobs, to meet the needs of her community. Overseer Charlene Naylor's life is a model of compassion in action. Her leadership has shaped lives, strengthened families, and uplifted Springfield with grace, humility, and extraordinary dedication. She is, without question, a true Commonwealth Heroine.

**Nominated by State Representative Bud L. Williams**



## **Gladys Oyola-Lopez, Springfield**

Gladys Oyola-Lopez is an accomplished public servant with more than 26 years of experience in state and local government, recognized for her leadership in election administration and civic engagement. Born in Puerto Rico and raised in Springfield, Massachusetts, she has dedicated her career to strengthening democratic processes and ensuring equitable access to civic participation.



She studied at Westfield State University and Bay Path University, earning a degree in Leadership and Organizational Studies with a minor in Business. Her education provided a strong foundation in organizational leadership and public administration, which she has applied throughout her career. Gladys has served the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in several capacities, including roles at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Massachusetts House of Representatives. Her work has supported effective government operations and strengthened connections between public institutions and the communities they serve. In 2010, she made history as the first Latina appointed as an Election Commissioner in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. In this role, she has successfully administered more than 30 local, state, and federal elections, ensuring their integrity, transparency, and accessibility. She has also overseen the local implementation of two decennial federal census counts, helping to ensure accurate representation and equitable distribution of resources. Through her leadership and long-standing service, Gladys Oyola-Lopez has made a lasting impact on her community and continues to be a respected leader in public service.

**Nominated by State Representative Carlos Gonzalez**

## **Bonny Rathbone, Palmer**

Bonny Rathbone has dedicated her life to her family and the Town of Palmer, serving as a teacher, school administrator and volunteer. She has given her time and energy in the service of the students and community that she loves. Bonny currently serves as Chairperson of the Palmer School Committee, an elected position that she has held for 9 years. During that time, she has served on countless sub-committees working on issues regarding attendance, policy, budget and finance, facilities and the Superintendent Search Committee. As a former educator and school administrator, Bonny has played an essential role in nurturing students with great care to guide them on the path toward academic and personal success. Bonny's passion to serve others goes far beyond the field of education. As an advocate for the Town of Palmer, she serves as a volunteer at Palmer Food Share and currently sits on the Board of Directors. With a mission to provide food and resources to those in need, Bonny works with a team of tireless advocates who put people first. As a mother and grandmother, her dedication to her family and her faith is an important part of her life. Bonny is a woman of faith and is actively involved with St. Paul's Church in Palmer. She continues to be a champion for her community by regularly attending sporting events, plays, concerts and many local activities. Bonny goes above and beyond to support others and is the ultimate embodiment of community spirit.

**Nominated by State Representative Todd Smola**

## **Carla Sarno, Springfield**

Carla Sarno is a resident of Springfield, Massachusetts, and is most widely known as the wife of the city's long-serving mayor, Domenic J. Sarno. She frequently appears alongside Mayor Sarno at local community events, such as restaurant openings, holiday parties at City Hall, and civic celebrations. Professionally, she is an analyst for the Springfield Public Schools district. She and the Mayor have two daughters, Cassandra and Chiara, and are active in supporting local initiatives, including healthcare professionals and youth programs, like Junior Achievement. She is a strong advocate for youth and families and does a lot of volunteer work in Western Massachusetts!

**Nominated by State Representative Orlando Ramos**



# HAMPSHIRE COUNTY

## **Kate DiSanto, Southampton**



In the Town of Southampton, where more than 2,000 residents are age 60 or older, the Council on Aging serves as an essential hub of resources, connection, and community. At the heart of this work is Kate DiSanto, whose lifelong dedication to serving seniors has made her a trusted advocate and a warm, familiar face to many. Kate's commitment to older adults began early through volunteer experiences at the Holyoke Veterans' Home. Those formative experiences sparked a deep respect for senior citizens and a passion for supporting their wellbeing. She later expanded her expertise by becoming a Serving the Health Insurance Needs of Everyone (SHINE) counselor, where she guides residents through the complexities of insurance and healthcare with clarity and compassion.

Today, Kate continues that commitment as the Director of the Southampton Council on Aging, where she has played an important role in modernizing programs and expanding outreach. Among her notable efforts is the development of the Memory Café, an inclusive program offering seniors opportunities for engagement, learning, and joy. Whether participating in informational talks, enjoying entertainment, or attending remotely through Zoom, seniors benefit from the café's welcoming and flexible environment. Known for her warm smile and unwavering willingness to help, Kate takes pride in connecting older adults with the resources, support, and community they need to thrive. Her dedication strengthens the fabric of Southampton's aging services and enriches the lives of the residents she serves every day.

**Nominated by State Senator John Velis**

## **Elizabeth A. LaFond, Granby**



Elizabeth Lafond, of Granby, is no stranger to the work that goes on behind the scenes when it comes to educating children in social and economic distress. She has 50 years of administrative support, policy making, coaching, and mentoring women in academics and sports to prove it.

A native of Holyoke, she was recruited into the school district and spent 44 years working along side superintendents and the school committee on such issues as school desegregation, equity in the distribution of resources, and creation of policies designed to promote success for the children of her new home town, Hatfield, and currently, Granby. Ten years ago, while serving on the Hatfield school committee, she was asked to join the staff of the MA Association of School Committees (MASC) as a Field Director. In that role she assumed responsibility for school districts along the Connecticut River and in Western Massachusetts. She has assisted over two dozen school committees in finding superintendents and provided information, support, and school leadership training to an additional 35 school systems. As a champion for females in sports and in life, Ms. Lafond served as Commissioner of the area woman's basketball league, creating opportunities for young girls to use their skills to fulfill their dreams of playing at the Pro-Am level. Today, she remains committed to children through her membership on the Granby School Committee and continuing to serve MASC's school districts in the small and rural districts of Berkshire, Hamden, Franklin and Hampshire Counties.

**Nominated by State Senator Jacob R. Oliveira**

## **Britt Ruhe, Granby**



Britt is a public art leader and community builder dedicated to transforming shared spaces and strengthening civic connection through art. As Founder and Executive Director of Common Wealth Murals, she has led the creation of more than 100 murals across Western Massachusetts and beyond. Under her leadership, Common Wealth Murals has engaged thousands of children, youth, adults, and local artists in collectively beautifying public spaces with their histories, heroes, and hopes. Britt has also helped preserve the legacy of the Black Arts Movement in Massachusetts by collaborating with artists, scholars, and cultural institutions to restore historically significant murals and protect the AfriCOBRA Archive, ensuring cultural histories remain accessible to future generations. Guided by a deep belief in the power of public art to foster belonging and civic pride, Britt champions artists and collaborative creative processes so every community sees itself reflected, honored, and empowered in shared spaces. Her work builds community, identity, civic engagement and participation in the arts.

**Nominated by State Representative Mindy Domb**

## HAMPSHIRE COUNTY

### Lexi Walters Wright, Florence

Lexi Walters Wright, owner of High Five Books, is an inspiring and joyful force in her community, creating a space where connection, imagination, and belonging flourish. Her journey began in publishing, with editorial roles at Meredith Corporation and Disney Publishing after studying journalism and education at Drake University. After moving to Northampton and later settling in nearby Florence, she was drawn to the area's literary spirit and vibrant LGBTQIA+ community, and she recognized an opportunity to create something special. In 2019, she opened High Five Books as an inclusive third place where children and caregivers could gather, celebrate stories, and feel fully affirmed in who they are. The store is intentionally curated to uplift books by historically marginalized creators, especially BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and disabled and neurodiverse individuals, centering lived experiences while ensuring that every reader can both see themselves reflected and discover new perspectives through meaningful window experiences at every age.



That sense of joy and care extends beyond the shelves. During the pandemic, Wright personally delivered books throughout the Pioneer Valley, turning a moment of isolation into one of connection and delight for local families. Her commitment to community continues through her support of organizations such as Bryant School, TransHealth, Empty Arms Bereavement Support, and Translate Gender, helping to build a world where all families, identities, and experiences are honored. Through creativity, generosity, and an unmistakable sense of joy, Wright has created more than a bookstore. She has built a thriving, affirming community where everyone is welcomed, celebrated, and inspired.

Nominated by State Representative Lindsay Sabadosa

## MIDDLESEX COUNTY

### Susan Abramson, Burlington

Rabbi Susan Abramson is the longest serving female rabbi in New England and an inspiring leader to the Burlington community. Although she has many accomplishments, I am nominating her as this year's Commonwealth Heroine for her work on the Bearing Witness @ ICE standouts held outside of the Burlington ICE facility every Wednesday. As a result of Rabbi Abramson and her fellow organizers' activism and commitment, the numbers at these standouts have grown from just a few individuals to nearly a thousand. Her work has helped bring awareness to the inhumane treatment of our friends, family members and neighbors who were taken by federal agents and housed in this center, forced to sleep on the floor and denied proper food and medication. Rabbi Abramson's efforts have helped bring national attention to the mistreatment happening at this ICE facility. Her dedication and tireless efforts to keep these protests peaceful and purposeful have united local, state, and federal leaders in a shared stand against the federal government's unacceptable actions.



Nominated by State Representative Kenneth Gordon



## **Tina Alu, Cambridge**



Tina serves as Executive Director of the Cambridge Economic Opportunity Committee (CEOC), Cambridge's community action agency dedicated to reducing poverty and expanding opportunity for residents facing economic hardship. Tina has devoted her career to advancing equity and access to essential resources for individuals and families across Cambridge. Tina began her work at CEOC over 30 years ago as a sexuality education coordinator, steadily taking on leadership roles while helping shape programs grounded in compassion and responsiveness to community needs. Since becoming ED in 2018, she has strengthened CEOC's role as a vital hub for services, connecting thousands of residents each year to food assistance, housing stabilization support, workforce development resources, financial coaching, and free tax preparation services that promote long-term economic stability. A collaborative and mission-driven leader, Tina has built strong partnerships within the Cambridge community to address systemic challenges such as food insecurity and poverty. During the pandemic, she helped guide coordinated emergency food distribution efforts that ensured vulnerable residents continued to receive critical support during a time of unprecedented need. Through her decades of service and steady leadership, Tina Alu embodies the spirit of a Commonwealth Heroine, making a lasting difference in the Cambridge community and beyond.

Nominated by State Senator Sal DiDomenico

## **Francesca Arsenault, Acton**



Fran Arsenault is a member of the Acton Select Board and local leader. She has spent her time supporting the residents of Acton with a focus on equity. Before serving on the Select Board, she volunteered on various committees and worked closely with local nonprofits and organizations. Since she was elected, Fran has worked to uplift voices from across Acton. She has focused on diversity and inclusion, fighting climate change, and supporting local businesses. Fran is a dedicated member of our community, and she works hard to support all in the Town of Acton.

Nominated by State Representative Danillo Sena

## **Laurie Bent, Weston**



Laurie is a dedicated member of the Weston community, having recently stepped down after six years of service on the Weston Select Board. She previously served for ten years on Weston's Conservation Commission. Laurie is a long-time advocate for sustainability and conservation. Under her leadership, the Town of Weston developed a Climate Action Resilience Plan, instituted Pay As You Throw rates at the Weston Transfer Station, hired Weston's first Sustainability Coordinator, and instituted tiered water rates to reduce the Town's spending on water resources and educate Weston residents on the implications of consuming too much water. Beyond environmental advocacy, Laurie pioneered Weston's first Celebrate Weston, a town-wide event for residents of all ages to foster community and display Weston's diverse clubs and organizations. She has always focused on being collaborative and building bridges in her community. To that note, Laurie led a movement to retire the term "Selectman" to refer to a member of Weston's Select Board, instituting "member of the Selectboard" or "Selectite" as appropriate alternatives, an initiative to promote inclusion in local government.

Nominated by State Representative Alice Peisch

## **Susie Chhoun, Lowell**



Susie is an educator, a community volunteer, and a fierce advocate for democracy. Born in a Cambodian refugee camp after her family escaped the Khmer Rouge conflict. She came to the United States with her family in the mid-1980s, eventually settling in Lowell in 1989. Susie has worked as a teaching assistant for over twenty-five years at Lowell Community Charter Public School. She served on the Lowell School Committee from 2022-2023, where she focused on improved language access for students and their families. In addition to her professional life, Susie is a dedicated community volunteer. She generously gives her time to assist with cultural events in the city such as the Khmer New Year Celebrations, and the annual Clemente Park Volleyball Tournament. She also serves as one of the hosts of Voice of Democracy, a local Khmer-language show that provides the Cambodian community about current events to increase civic engagement. She is an outspoken and passionate advocate for human rights and democracy both at home and abroad.

Nominated by State Representative Tara Hong

## Theresa Clawson, Tyngsboro



Theresa has been involved in community service for many years. She is that individual you can always count on to step up and help whenever and wherever necessary. Theresa has been a volunteer member of the Recreation Committee for twenty years, where she serves as the town beach liaison and as the committee secretary. In her role as the beach liaison, Theresa oversees all activities at the town beach. She handles the opening and closing of the beach for the season, takes care to be sure the beach kept clean for the residents and coordinates six triathlons every summer. Theresa serves the Town of Tyngsborough tirelessly as a volunteer. Whether involving holiday or cultural events, she is busy year-round, year after year to be sure that residents have fun, family-oriented events to look forward to. She volunteers her time to Saint John's the Evangelist Parish in the neighboring community of Chelmsford. Here she has served as a Cantor at the 4:00 PM Mass on Saturday afternoons for more than thirty years. Theresa is a kind, giving, humble person who helps make our community a wonderful place to live.

Nominated by State Representative Colleen Garry

## Marcia Cooper, Newton



Marcia is President Emeritus of Green Newton and current member of the Public Affairs and School Committees. She has served as a board member since 2005 and as President from 2008 until August 2024. She also served on the local Chamber's Environment Committee. Marcia continues to play a leadership role in advancing Green Newton's mission of empowering the Newton community, including its youth, to create practical, community-focused solutions to the climate challenges facing Newton and the world. Her ability to engage meaningfully with residents and officials alike has enabled her to have a significant impact on environmental policy at both the city and state levels. Marcia's favorite role is mentoring youth volunteers to engage with others about climate solutions.

Nominated by State Representative Greg Schwartz

## Jeanne Craigie, Stoneham

Jeanne Craigie has built a lasting legacy rooted in public service, consistently working to make Stoneham a better place to call home. A lifelong Spartan, she was one of the high school's earliest female athletes in the pre-Title IX era and carried that same drive into decades of community leadership.

Craigie competed in field hockey, basketball and softball while managing the gymnastics team, earning six varsity letters and captaining both field hockey and softball. She was named Most Athletic in the Class of 1969 and recognized for her leadership and sportsmanship. A knee injury at Northeastern University ended her competitive career but redirected her path. After graduating in 1974, she became Northeastern's first female athletic trainer and one of the earliest women certified by the National Athletic Trainers' Association. She was later named Woman of the Year and awarded a men's varsity letter sweater for her contributions. Returning to Stoneham in 1979, Craigie dedicated herself to public service through the school system, serving as an athletic trainer until 1986 and supporting generations of student-athletes. She went on to serve 18 years on the School Committee and Finance Board, helping guide policy, support education and oversee financial decisions.

For the past nine years, Craigie has served as Town Moderator, presiding over meetings and encouraging civic participation. She remains actively involved in key community efforts, including the Stoneham High School Building Project Committee, School Building Committee, and Stoneham 300 Committee. Jeanne's lifelong dedication has made a lasting impact on both students and the broader community. She and her husband, Paul, continue to call Stoneham home.

Nominated by State Representative Michael Day



## **Sarah Donnelly, Natick**

Sarah Donnelly has been the Natick High School Competitive Speech and Debate Team Head Coach for a multitude of years, as well as an educator at Natick High School. She also holds several leadership positions in the Speech & Debate Community, both locally and nationally. The team has enjoyed immense success with her at the helm, producing numerous state and national champions in Speech and Debate. Beyond her accomplishments in guiding her students to success on the debate stage, her tenure at Natick High has seen her personally mentor hundreds of students, aiding them to go on to lead successful and productive lives in the Commonwealth and across the nation.



Her impact on our Commonwealth and our next generation cannot be understated, as the students whom she has mentored begin the rest of their lives with the invaluable skills and capabilities she has personally endowed them with. Our teachers are truly some of our most influential and yet most underappreciated heroes, but it is rare to find a teacher and mentor of Ms. Donnelly's caliber. Many of us can point to a teacher who truly impacted our lives and how we view the world and, most importantly, ourselves, and I can say with wholehearted sincerity that students who can point to Ms. Donnelly as that teacher in their lives have a special honor in doing so.

Ms. Donnelly deserves to be recognized for this impact as well as for her excellence of character and leadership capabilities. She has made a difference in each and every one of her mentees' and students' lives, and it is for those reasons that I believe Sarah should be named a Commonwealth Heroine.

**Nominated by State Representative David P. Linsky**

## **Andrea Dunne Adrian, Framingham**

Andrea is a lifelong resident of Framingham whose decades of community service and leadership exemplify the spirit of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women's Heroine Award. For decades, Andrea has consistently dedicated herself to improving the lives of families, children, and neighbors through hands-on civic engagement and advocacy. Andrea's contributions span a wide range of community institutions, including active involvement in Parent-Teacher Organizations, youth sports programs, Town Meeting participation, and local parks and recreation initiatives. Her longstanding commitment reflects a deep belief in building strong, connected communities and ensuring that residents, especially families and young people, have access to supportive, enriching environments. As a leader, Andrea has taken on impactful roles such as serving in the Framingham Mayor's Community Center Advisory Committee and as President of the Coburnville-Tripoli Neighborhood Association, where she worked to bring residents together, advocate for neighborhood improvements, and foster community dialogue around public safety and development.



Beyond her formal roles, Andrea has demonstrated courage and integrity by speaking out on critical issues affecting women and children. She has publicly advocated for stronger protections and accountability in response to incidents impacting student safety, emphasizing the responsibility of communities to support and protect victims. Andrea's legacy is defined not by titles, but by impact. She is a connector, an advocate, and a steady presence in Framingham, someone who shows up, speaks up, and works tirelessly behind the scenes to make her community safer, stronger, and more inclusive. Her lifelong dedication to civic engagement and her unwavering commitment to the well-being of others make her a truly deserving nominee for the MCSW Heroine Award.

**Nominated by State Representative Priscila S. Sousa**



## Brynn Durno, Pepperell



It has been said that the mark of a truly great leader is that they do the right thing, in every endeavor and throughout every challenge, whether or not anyone is watching. In truth, great leaders are so much more than that. Never content with the status quo, they are always looking to improve not only themselves, but also their community. Brynn Durno is an exceptional leader, who not only embodies the aforementioned qualities, but does so with grace, class, heart, and style. She never misses an opportunity to contribute to the community-at-large, whether in her zip code or her sphere of influence, whether in her work hours or when "off-duty" (great leaders are never "off-duty"). When roadblocks come her way, Brynn tirelessly and strategically considers the best path forward and she is absolutely tenacious about following that path to a successful outcome. In these ways – and many more – Brynn is an inspiring role model for her peers, up-and-coming future leaders, and, certainly, current leaders. The mark of a truly great leader – a hero – is that in addition to all of the above, they are humble. Brynn does not seek the limelight, and she is the first to include others in any accomplishment she achieves. Her word is her bond, and her focus is unflinchingly on contributing in a way that is purposeful and uplifts others. In a world where news and social media can blur the lines around critical values like integrity, Brynn is a brilliant reminder that some things cannot and will never be compromised: She is a hero in every sense of the word.

Nominated by State Representative Margaret Scarsdale

## Laurel Farnsworth, Newton



For nearly 35 years, Laurel has dedicated herself to a variety of Newton non-profit organizations. A graduate of Smith College with an MBA from Boston University, Laurel first worked professionally in public administration and as a property and inspection manager. From there, she served her Newton community in a wide variety of roles at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Newton, the Newton Historical Society, the Social Science Club of Newton, and as a board officer and Co-President at the Newton Cultural Alliance/The Allen Center. Laurel's vast knowledge of history and the arts, her experience as a world traveler, and her quiet passion to work in areas that enrich her community and the lives of others—by providing opportunity, wisdom and counsel, always from the wings of the stage—elevates her with distinction to a true "unsung hero" in the City of Newton.

Nominated by State Representative Amy Mah Sangiolo

## Barbara Fenby, Marlborough



Barbara "Babs" Fenby has been active in political and social justice causes in the Commonwealth for decades. She currently serves as a member of the Marlborough Democratic City Committee as well as the City of Marlborough Planning Board, where she has previously held the role of Chair. She actively participates in regular food drives and various protests to bring attention to issues of political importance and disparity in our community. At many of these protests, she serves as a marshal to make sure that all attendees and passersby remain safe. Additionally, Babs regularly organizes and leads frequent Peace standouts to recognize injustices around the world and call for an end to violence at the hands of the United States and other national governments. Babs is an AVID world traveler who is always off on her next adventure with her friends or family. She raised her children to appreciate the value of living in a global society and is instilling that same appreciation in her grandchildren as well. She is a lover of music and of sport, namely soccer and many weekends throughout the year she can be found at Gillette Stadium cheering on the New England Revolution or taking in a concert. I often refer to Babs as a badass and most people I know would love to be able make half of the impact that Babs has had on our community and her family or just to be half as cool as she is.

Nominated by State Representative Danielle Gregoire



### **Lisa Gibalerio, Belmont**

Lisa Gibalerio, MPH is a Public Health Educator and long-time Program Coordinator of the Belmont Wellness Coalition (a program of Wayside Youth & Family Support Network). Lisa has developed hundreds of prevention-centered video shorts, dozens of Tip Sheets, and several educational workshops – for both parents and teens – on a wide variety of topics, including substance use prevention, understanding youth mental health, the impact of screens, the culture of stress, and more. Lisa also runs a monthly parent group, offers parents one-to-one support sessions, and writes the monthly “Ask Lisa” advice column for The Belmont Voice, a community newspaper.

Nominated by State Representative David M. Rogers



### **Tanya Howard, Medford**

Tanya’s contributions to the vibrancy of the creative community in Medford have been immeasurable. As a founding board member of West Medford Open Studios, she was integral to establishing an event that showcased a modest number of neighborhood artists and, over 25 years, to promoting and sustaining it as it grew to accommodate hundreds more artists, writers, and musicians from the region. The success of West Medford Opens studios will continue as a citywide festival beginning in 2026 under the new umbrella of the Arts Collaborative Medford. Additionally, she has shared her culinary talents by offering catering and cooking classes for students of all ages through her own business venture, Tanya the Homestyle Gourmet. Tanya’s dedication to these projects has nurtured the community in countless and unseen ways, and for that, we celebrate her.

Co-nominated by State Senator Patricia Jehlen and State Representative Sean Garballey



### **Vineeta Kumar, Lexington**

Vineeta Kumar is an exemplary leader, a brilliant businesswoman, and a deeply committed community organizer. In March 2025, Vineeta was elected to the Lexington Select Board, becoming the first Indian American and the first person of color to serve in the role. This historic victory is only the latest step in Vineeta’s long history of applying her passionate and thoughtful problem solving to civic engagement. Throughout her 15 years in Lexington, Vineeta has served in many volunteer roles including President of the High School PTO, Chair of the Town Meeting Members’ Association, member of the Town Manager Search Screening Committee, member of the Board of the Lexington Education Foundation, and President of IGIG (Indian Americans Getting Involved Group). In all of these roles, through skillful listening and empathy, she helped maintain close working relationships to enable a smooth continuation of business. Integral to Vineeta’s approach is centering inclusion and equity to advance civic engagement in town and a practical, solution-oriented mindset. Vineeta not only weighs options strategically, she works to get the job done, rolling up her sleeves to ensure that whatever project she is working on results in a successful outcome. She is a credit to her community and the Commonwealth.

Nominated by State Representative Michelle Ciccollo



### **Thao Lan, Lowell**

Thao is a dedicated mother, published author, and mentor, seasoned deep tissue/sports therapist and certified Infant Massage Teacher committed to fostering comprehensive well-being. As the founder of Push Muscular Restoration in North Chelmsford, she has demonstrated exceptional leadership and strategic planning, building a reputation for excellence and innovation. Through her evidence-based pain management and self-care initiatives, she empowers both clients and practitioners to take control of their health. Thao’s expertise lies in supporting endurance athletes with targeted treatments to enhance performance and expedite recovery, as well as providing alternative solutions for individuals seeking to avoid surgery through specialized techniques that alleviate pain and promote holistic healing. Thao prioritizes initiatives that foster lasting positive impact. With extensive experience in leadership, strategic planning, and community engagement, she has served for many years as a board member with the Coalition for a Better Acre, The Wish Project, Girl Scout Troop 63237 mom, and the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association. Beyond her board service, Thao collaborates with local leaders to develop fundraising strategies, establish community partnerships, and secure resources to support family stability. Driven by a commitment to connect individuals with essential services and recognize those making a daily impact, she produces a dedicated interview series on Facebook and YouTube via her podcast Your Favorite Nosey Neighbor, highlighting key community leaders and nonprofits.

Nominated by State Representative Vanna Howard



### **Denise Lauers, Somerville**

Denise was born in Brazil and recently became the President of the Mystic Tenants Association. She has been an incredible force in building the power and community of the Tenants Association by organizing events and supporting other leaders in the Mystics and throughout Somerville.

Nominated by State Representative Christine P. Barber



### **Dr. Patricia Kelly Luoto, Hudson**

Although an accomplished career kept her busy, it didn't stop Dr. Patricia Kelly Luoto, Professor Emeritus of Framingham State University, from making significant volunteer contributions in the Town of Hudson. Luoto brought 32 years of expertise as a Chairperson and Director of the John C. Stalker Institute of Food and Nutrition to her role at the Hudson Community Food Pantry. She has volunteered at the Pantry for more than 20 years and currently serves on its Board of Directors, where she consistently fills essential volunteer roles and helps the Pantry stay informed on regional trends, collaborate with the Greater Boston Food Bank, and ensure a safe, healthy environment. Pat is also involved in Hudson's busy cultural events. She serves as co-chair of the Hudson Cultural Council and is a member of the Hudson Cultural Alliance, which is seeking to transform a former historic Armory building in Hudson into a preeminent cultural destination for the Metrowest region. Pat has lent her considerable abilities to this major undertaking: she has served on the Alliance's Board of Directors, organized entertainment for the 'Summer Arts at the Armory' program, helped secure significant grant funding, and is a fixture at the many Hudson arts festivals. Pat's efforts make a difference in the lives of her Hudson neighbors and our Commonwealth thanks her!

Nominated by State Representative Kate Hogan



### **Zeyneb Magavi, Cambridge**

Zeyneb is Executive Director at HEET, a nonprofit energy innovation hub. Her 2017 proposal to use Thermal Energy Networks via a GasToGeo pathway to build a new thermal utility has since spread globally. Launching Zeyneb and HEET into leadership of an emerging industry, including the creation of a scientific research consortium, policy pathways, community engagement tools, workforce training, and a growing project pipeline. Her work in energy is driven by understanding that the energy system is the basis of our economy and of human well-being, today and for future generations. She has been named FiveonFire, APA, GRIST50, and a Bostonian of the Year. Zeyneb has been part of launching two start-ups and has worked at BBN Technologies, Harvard, and MIT. She studied physics at Brown University and global health and sustainability at Harvard University. She is committed to driving forward innovative, multi-disciplinary, collaborative, and compassionate solutions to the challenges humanity faces and to leaving the world better for her children.

Nominated by State Representative Steven Owens



### **Samantha McGarry, Framingham**

Samantha McGarry is a resident of Framingham, Massachusetts. Born in London, England, she moved to the U.S. in 2000 for work and ended up staying for love. Twenty-six years later, she is a wife and mother of two college-aged children. She became a US citizen in 2015 and today is a member of the Framingham Democrats. Samantha is a communications professional with a 35-year career in message development, PR strategy, and media relations. For nearly a decade, she has been an activist and community organizer, working on social justice issues close to her heart, including gun violence prevention, food insecurity, and immigrant justice. She has been an active volunteer with Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, Grassroots for Gun Violence Prevention, and, more recently, with Mass 50501, Framingham Fights Back, and LUCE. When she's not working or fighting for social justice, Samantha loves to dance, bake, and eat cheese.

Nominated by State Representative Jack Patrick Lewis



### **Frances N. Nwajei, SHRM-CP, Medford**

I am honored to nominate Frances Nwajei as a Commonwealth Heroine. Frances serves as the Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the City of Medford. In this role, she has coordinated programs to bring our diverse population together. Many have now been able to learn and experience different cultural customs through these events. Frances is a “people person” and has a way of bringing the community together which is important for all. Frances also is an advocate for the disabled and is their voice to make sure they have access to participate in community forums. Her compassion and determination that everyone is treated with respect and fairness is beyond reproach. For these reasons, I believe Frances is a true Heroine and is deserving of this honor.

**Nominated by State Representative Paul Donato**

### **Valerie Opara, Lowell**

Valerie Opara (née Langley) currently serves as Business Operations Administrator at Boston Children’s Hospital, overseeing the daily financial operations of the Respiratory Care Department. Her responsibilities include budget preparation, accounting, purchasing, payroll, and strategic business planning. Valerie previously worked as a Unit Manager at WGBH Boston, contributing to the production and telecast of the acclaimed program Frontline. She also served as an adjunct professor at Middlesex Community College, where she was known for leading engaging classroom discussions and building strong foundations for students in Introduction to Business.



As a former retail business owner in Lowell alongside her husband, she brought valuable real-world experience into her teaching. She attended Boston Latin Academy before earning a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Psychology with a minor in Business Administration from Suffolk University. She also holds two master’s degrees: one in Management from Cambridge College and another in Education from Northeastern University. Valerie served ten years in the United States Army Reserves. Deeply engaged in her community, she is a founding member and former Treasurer of the Nigerian Association of Merrimack Valley, organizer and adviser of the African Festival of Lowell, and a trustee of the Affordable Housing Trust of Lowell. She lives in Lowell with her husband of thirty-three years and their three adult children.

**Nominated by State Representative Rodney Elliott**

### **Elvira Pinjic, Everett**

Elvira is an immigrant from Bosnia and Hercegovina who settled in Everett, MA. She is a strong and passionate advocate for making healthcare accessible to everyone. Elvira has been serving as the Executive Director for Children’s Health Care in Everett (JCCHCE) for over 3 years. JCCHCE is a nonprofit organization dedicated to expanding access to health care, health education, and community support services for children, families, and underserved populations in Everett and surrounding communities. Through her work with the Joint Committee, she brought together parents, educators, health care professionals, civic leaders, and community partners together to improve health outcomes and reduce barriers to health care. Her mission is to ensure that residents of Everett and surrounding neighborhoods have access to care needed to be healthy and productive members of society. Elvira is one of those heroines who finds fulfillment in helping those who are vulnerable and actively engages with the community to find and support those in need.



**Nominated by State Representative Joseph W. McGonagle, Jr.**

## Stacey Raffi, Holliston

As the mother of children attending Holliston Public Schools, Stacey became engaged in the intersection of community and education more than a dozen years ago, concurrently serving as a member of the Holliston Parent Teacher Organization (which she now serves as president even after 12 years of dedication) while tackling budget and policy as a member of the Holliston School Committee for 9 years (3 of them as chair). Her engagement continually broadened to initiatives that raise the quality of life in Holliston for a variety of ages. Currently, she holds leadership roles on municipal entities such as the Traffic Advisory Board, Council on Aging, Holliston Drug Alcohol Awareness Coalition, and Envisioning Future Holliston Committee.



Her community spirit shines as a board member of the MetroWest YMCA Outdoor Learning Center and of Celebrate Holliston, a volunteer group that produces the town's annual municipal festival and took on responsibility for a year-long celebration of the town's 300th anniversary. All of this came on the heels of her service, beginning almost twenty years ago, as vice chair of the Holliston Business Association. As owner of the Path Figure Skating Club, she knew firsthand the importance of supporting other small businesses to lift the local economy for all. While not every member of her close-knit community could list all of Stacey's endeavors, they all know her as the person whose positive outlook and genuine friendliness shine in every act of service.

Nominated by Senate President Karen Spilka

## Leela Ramachandran, Acton

Leela Ramachandran is a leader in the LUCE Network, to support undocumented immigrants across Massachusetts who are under threat of arrest and deportation by the federal government. She has gone above and beyond the call of duty to personally assist immigrant families, organize and train volunteers to become part of LUCE, and advocate with state and federal elected officials to intervene in the detention of immigrants, which has dramatically increased due to the current administration in Washington, DC. Leela is also a member of the Acton Boxborough Regional School Committee, where she has been an outspoken advocate for continuing to improve public schools, especially for children who face bullying, isolation, and marginalization.



Nominated by State Senator James B. Eldridge

## Patricia Reppucci, Westford

Since 1974, Patricia "Pat" Reppucci has been an integral part of the Town of Westford by humbly leading organizations through volunteer work for the betterment of the town and the residents living in it. She previously served as President of the Board for Friends of the Cameron Senior Center for four years and is currently Vice President. She serves on the Disability Commission, the Tax Relief for the Elderly and Disabled (TREAD) Committee and has served on the town's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee since its inception. Pat has dedicated years to the Westford Coalition for Non-Violence (WCNV) bringing attention and awareness to issues of domestic violence. She is a known resource for residents across all of these committees and more.



For the past 33 years, Pat has been an active member of the Westford Community Chorus, 13 years of which she has served as Treasurer. Pat is a wonderful mother of three and grandmother of three. She is a ferocious reader, knitter, music lover, lover of musicals, Broadway shows, opera and poetry. Her love for spreading arts and music within the community and her dedication to supporting residents of all ages and backgrounds are just a few reasons why she has been nominated as a 2026 Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative James Arciero

## Louise Rice, Cambridge

Louise Rice is a retired public health leader and lifelong community activist whose career has spanned more than three decades in public health, HIV/AIDS advocacy, research ethics, and community-based care. She retired in 2013 as Senior Director of Public Health and School Health Nursing for the City of Cambridge, where she oversaw infectious disease response, immunization programs, community health education, and school health services. Louise began her career in 1984 as a Public Health Nurse with the Boston Department of Health and Hospitals, working in Maternal and Child Health and Infectious Disease. With the emergence of the AIDS pandemic, she joined the AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts in 1989, where she developed training programs for community members and health care providers. She was promoted to Director of Education in 1994, leading statewide education and prevention initiatives. From 1998 to 2000, Louise worked at the HIV/AIDS Bureau of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health on special projects.



She then joined Fenway Community Health (now Fenway Health) in 2000 as Director of Research and Evaluation. In this role, she became a respected trainer and consultant in research ethics, human subjects protection, behavioral health, and community-based HIV prevention. Since her retirement, Louise has remained deeply engaged in public health and community service. She has served on the Boards of Directors of Fenway Health and the AIDS Action Committee and volunteers with Great Dog Rescue of New England and On the Rise, a community-based organization supporting unhoused women. From 2019 to 2025, she served as the community representative on MIT's federally mandated Committee on Animal Welfare, overseeing research involving animals ranging from fish to nonhuman primates. She and her wife of 49 years have two sons and three grandchildren. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, birding, and hiking.

**Nominated by State Representative Mike Connolly**

## Sarah Rosenberg, Cambridge

Sarah Rosenberg has dedicated her career to strengthening public education and advocating for the educators and students who make our communities thrive. As an Instructional Technology Specialist in the Cambridge Public Schools for many years, Sarah has worked tirelessly to support teachers in integrating technology into the classroom in ways that expand opportunity, deepen learning, and ensure students have the tools they need to succeed in an increasingly digital world. Her work has helped educators adapt to changing educational environments while keeping students' needs at the center.



Beyond her role in the classroom, Sarah has been a committed leader in the Cambridge Education Association, where she currently serves as Vice President. In this role, she has been a steadfast advocate for educators, working to ensure that teachers and school staff, many of whom are women, have the resources, professional respect, and working conditions they need to succeed. Her leadership has helped elevate the voices of educators and strengthen the profession at a time when supporting those who care for and educate our young people is more important than ever.

Sarah's work improves the lives of women and girls across the Commonwealth in multiple ways. By championing educators, she supports a workforce that is predominantly female. By strengthening our public schools, she helps ensure that girls in our classrooms have access to high-quality education, mentorship, and opportunities to explore fields like technology where women have historically been underrepresented. Through her advocacy, mentorship, and commitment to public education, Sarah Rosenberg has made a lasting impact on her community and the Commonwealth.

**Nominated by State Representative Marjorie Decker**

## Teresa Gentile Sauro, Newton



Terry Sauro works tirelessly to improve the lives of every Nonantum resident. As Chair of the Nonantum Neighborhood Association, daughter of one of the founding members of the St. Mary of Carmen Society, and Mayor of Nonantum, Terry listens, speaks up, and takes action. She has raised thousands of dollars for educational scholarships for Nonantum high schoolers, coordinated efforts for countless public safety and neighborhood improvements, and organized community events to support families and local businesses, all while honoring cherished heritage and uplifting tradition. A matriarch to The Lake family, her leadership is fierce and deeply compassionate. Terry is the person you call when you need help, the person you talk to when you need advice, and the person you rely on to get sh\*t done. She fights for what is right, serving as a central voice for residents, commanding respect with her fearless nature, and unwavering in her commitment to improving the community. Her advocacy has enriched the lives of countless individuals. Honoring the family and friends who came before her, she teaches others how to speak up when they may feel helpless, and she strengthens and protects tradition, instilling in future generations what it truly means to be Nonantum Strong. Thank you, Terry, for all that you do.

Nominated by State Representative John Lawn

## Maura Sullivan, Waltham



Maura Sullivan, MPA, serves as the Chief Executive Officer of The Arc of Massachusetts, the state's leading advocacy organization for individuals with autism and intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). In this role, she works in collaboration with The Arc's 17 chapters in Massachusetts, state and national partners, legislative leaders, and disability and health equity stakeholders to build policy, systems, and social change that expand access, protect rights, and improve the quality of life for people with IDD and autism. During her time with The Arc, Ms. Sullivan helped secure significant state budget investments and legislative victories, including Nicky's Law (establishing a statewide abuse registry), Police Training in Autism, and the statewide adoption and public funding of Operation House Call, The Arc's nationally recognized medical education program that partners with all major Massachusetts medical and nursing schools. She has directed Operation House Call for over a decade, preparing future clinicians to provide respectful, informed, and equitable care to people with autism and IDD. Ms. Sullivan has shaped state systems, influenced national health equity frameworks, and elevated the voices of individuals and families. Her leadership is shaped not only by her professional expertise, but by her lived experience as the mother of three children, including her two sons with autism, intellectual disabilities, and medical complexities. This personal commitment drives her advocacy for critical supports and fuels her belief in equity, dignity, and full inclusion for all people with disabilities and their families.

Nominated by State Representative Thomas M. Stanley

## Jeanette Velasquez, Weston



Jeanette's life story is one of resilience, perseverance, and an unwavering commitment to uplifting others. Though her journey began under circumstances she did not choose, entering foster care as an infant, the compassion of Massachusetts educators, mentors, and community leaders transformed her path and inspired a lifelong dedication to creating opportunities for others. Today, as a proud Weston resident and founder of Velasquez Tax & Business Services, Jeanette has become a champion for small businesses and underserved communities. She has helped secure more than \$2 million in loans and grants, guided entrepreneurs through business development and financial readiness, and serves as a City of Boston Small Business Technical Assistance Provider and longtime VITA volunteer.

During the pandemic, her leadership helped hundreds of businesses navigate relief programs, preserving jobs and strengthening local economies. Through Core Values Strong Families, she mentors youth in financial literacy, robotics, and leadership, empowering future generations with the skills and confidence they need. A wife, mother, grandmother, author, and community advocate, Jeanette continues to fight for equitable access to resources and opportunities. Her journey from foster child to entrepreneur and community-builder reflects the very best of the Commonwealth's values and serves as an inspiration to others facing adversity and striving toward a brighter future.

Nominated by State Senator Michael J. Barrett

### **Tania Vitvitsky, Sudbury**

Tania Vitvitsky is a true heroine, with decades of leadership in international development, public service, and community engagement. Born in a Displaced Persons camp in post-World War II Austria, she immigrated to the United States as a child, arriving in Boston aboard the USS General Sturgis on August 14, 1949. Tania spent more than two decades at the Sabre Foundation in Cambridge, Massachusetts, including as Executive Director and President. During her tenure, she developed and expanded international book donation programs across Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East, while overseeing operations that included managing a 64,000-square-foot warehouse in Lawrence, Massachusetts. Her work took her to 61 countries, organizing and leading international site visits across multiple continents. Tania is also deeply engaged in civic and nonprofit leadership. She currently serves as President of the Ukrainian Charitable Platform in Chicago; Vice President and Trustee of Trustees of Donations for Education in Liberia; and a member of the Advisory Committee of the Ukrainian Catholic University Foundation. She is also an advisor to Ukraine Global Scholars. Locally, she has served as Chair of the Sudbury Democratic Town Committee, is a Commissioner of the Sudbury Housing Authority, volunteers at the Sudbury Food Pantry, and more. Tania holds a BFA from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and remains committed to advancing education, equity, and democratic values at home and abroad.



**Nominated by State Representative Carmine Gentile**

### **Anna Winter Rasmussen, Concord**

Anna has devoted more than three decades of volunteer service to protecting the historic and natural landmarks that define the 14th Middlesex community. As a steward of history and culture, Ms. Rasmussen has served on the boards of the Old Manse, the Concord Museum, Louisa May Alcott's Orchard House, and the Walden Woods Project. Her commitment to preservation led her to found Save Our Heritage, an organization dedicated to strengthening protections for Minute Man National Historical Park, Walden Pond, and their surrounding landscapes. Ms. Rasmussen's impact extends beyond historic preservation. A passionate advocate for quality healthcare, she serves on the Board of Directors for Emerson Hospital and is a Trustee of Mass. Eye and Ear. Through decades of selfless service — whether safeguarding cultural treasures or improving health outcomes — Ms. Rasmussen exemplifies the spirit of the Commonwealth Heroines: women whose time, talent, enthusiasm, and generosity make our communities stronger.



**Nominated by State Representative Simon Cataldo**

## **NANTUCKET COUNTY**

### **Brooke Mohr, Nantucket**

If there is an opportunity for volunteerism or civic engagement on Nantucket, chances are you will see Brooke Mohr there. Brooke is currently a Select Board Member and serves on the finance board at the First Congregational Church and the board of Nourish Nantucket. She is also deeply involved in affordable housing advocacy and serves as the county representative on the Nantucket Planning and Economic Development Commission.



During her time in these positions, Brooke has helped to invest millions of dollars in affordable housing for year-round residents, establish a new island food pantry, conduct a regional food security assessment, and ensure that the voices of islanders are heard in discussions related to development and Nantucket's future. Her professional background is in social work and bookkeeping, and she is a mom of four and grandmother of six, two of whom were born on Nantucket.

**Co-nominated by State Representative Thomas Moakley and State Senator Julian Cyr**

# NORFOLK COUNTY

## Lynne Abbott, Walpole



Lynne Abbott is the definition of an unsung heroine. Lynne is the founder/director of Salt Water Initiative, a nonprofit providing Cape Cod vacation experiences for families living with a child with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She founded this nonprofit in 2022, and her hope in starting this nonprofit was that these families would have a renewed sense of well-being and know that, whatever circumstances they're facing, there is hope, beauty, and peace in the world, that they only need to know where to find it. Since its beginning, Salt Water Initiative has assisted 132 families with a goal of 80 in 2026! Along with her work for Salt Water Initiative, Lynne has been on the Board of Directors for ConfiKids, a local nonprofit with a mission to build confidence in kids through recreational sports, arts, and enrichment programs, since early 2023. Her work on these two nonprofits is just the tip of the iceberg. Lynne has been an advocate and supporter for those underserved for many years. A true unsung heroine.

Nominated by State Representative John H. Rogers

## Kerri Berry, Randolph



Kerri Berry exemplifies the strength, vision, and leadership of women in business, using her work to strengthen her community and support those in need in Randolph. Her restaurant, 1048 Bar & Grill on North Main Street, is much more than a place to eat. It is a welcoming gathering space, a source of comfort, and often a quiet refuge. Leading the establishment alongside her husband, Joe, she represents the resilience and importance of women leaders in the local economy and civic life. Interwoven into her daily life is a steadfast commitment to feeding and supporting those in need. She regularly provides meals to individuals experiencing homelessness, seniors, and families struggling to make ends meet. Her generosity is quiet, humble, and consistent. From a civic perspective, Kerri supports nearly every charitable effort in Randolph. She provides food and comfort to grieving families. She contributes to local fundraisers, school events, and community causes without hesitation. The word "no" simply does not seem to exist in her vocabulary when someone is in need. She simply acts out of compassion, integrity, and an unwavering love for her community. Her continued dedication to Randolph, its families, and its most vulnerable residents makes her a profoundly deserving recipient of recognition as a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Richard Wells

## Ellen Burns, Wellesley



Ellen Burns is the kind of leader every community hopes for - thoughtful, compassionate, and committed to bringing people together. She is incredibly deserving of this recognition. She has served on the Democratic Town Committee for more than 8 years, including 3 as Chair. As Vice President of the Wellesley Service League, she serves on the board of Wellesley Friendly Aid as the League's representative to the Camp Fund. She chairs the Provisional Class, planning and leading P-Week while serving as a mentor, advocate, and primary point of contact for new members. A longtime Wellesley resident and trusted friend to many, Ellen leads with both heart and action.

Co-nominated by State Senator Cynthia Creem and State Representative Alice Peisch

## Candice Hartford, Cohasset



Candice is the Founder of the non-profit, Raising Harts, which was created on behalf of Candice's Autistic twin boys, Keaton & Grady, and their sister, Isla. Her organization has created a community for families of Autistic children to make connections in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Raising Harts supports families with autistic & neurodiverse children through mentorship, workshops, and inclusive programming. With her amazing team, she works to empower parents on their journey and create inclusive places where kids can be themselves. Candice also works in the NICU at Mass General Hospital. Candice earned her Bachelor of Science in nursing at San Diego State University and has been a registered nurse for more than 20 years, advocating for all families.

Nominated by State Senator Patrick O'Connor



### **Kristie Henriksen, Quincy**

Kristie has been a successful business owner and entrepreneur since opening her first restaurant in Marina Bay in 1993. Since then, Kristie has opened several other beloved establishments in the area, contributing to the vibrant waterfront community that continues to thrive. At every opportunity, Kristie finds ways to give back to the community through charitable endeavors and community activism. Whether through food drives for the homeless, hosting special events for seniors, or through fundraising efforts to support local organizations like the Quincy Animal Shelter, Kristie continues to make a quiet yet significant positive impact in the lives of her neighbors. Kristie embodies the qualities honored by the Commonwealth Heroine Award in her leadership, community impact, and generosity of spirit. Through her decades of service, she has uplifted her community and inspired countless others to give back.

**Nominated by State Representative Bruce Ayers**



### **Karen Johnston, Weymouth**

Karen has set a standard of excellence that surrounding senior centers aspire to achieve. Under her leadership, services for local seniors have expanded significantly, including informational seminars, educational workshops, and engaging social activities. During the challenges of COVID-19, Karen demonstrated unwavering dedication by launching a grab-and-go food security program, ensuring seniors could safely receive hot meals. She often added a personal touch by dressing in themed costumes, recognizing the importance of uplifting spirits and supporting mental health during difficult times. Most recently, she brought creativity to life by designing an immersive Western-themed event, complete with a fully constructed Western town for seniors to enjoy. Since becoming Director, Karen has steadily increased the number of seniors served in the community. She is a motivated, compassionate, and seasoned professional who consistently prioritizes the needs of senior citizens. Through her efforts, Karen has made a lasting impact on the lives of countless individuals.

**Nominated by State Representative James Murphy**



### **Caleigh Keating, Franklin**

Caleigh is more than a librarian; she is a source of joy, comfort, and inspiration within the Franklin community. As the Youth Services Librarian at the Franklin Public Library, the first public library in America, Caleigh has transformed children's programming into something magical. Known lovingly as "Mrs. Caleigh" by families across Franklin, she has created a welcoming environment where children feel excited to learn, explore, and connect with others. Through summer reading programs, Saturday music classes, therapy dog reading sessions, and baby-wearing dance parties, she has fostered a sense of belonging for thousands of young learners. Under her leadership, the library welcomes over 10,000 visitors annually and continues to expand opportunities for learners of all backgrounds and abilities. Beyond the library walls, Caleigh's dedication reaches even further through homebound outreach services, multilingual programming, and regular visits to local public schools and community centers, where she helps families gain access to library resources. Benjamin Franklin once said, "Tell me, and I forget; teach me, and I may remember; involve me, and I learn." Caleigh Keating embodies this philosophy wholeheartedly, inspiring curiosity and creating lifelong learners through her community.

**Nominated by State Representative Jeffrey Roy**



### **Eileen Kelly, Quincy**

As Food Pantry Manager at Interfaith Social Services in Quincy, Eileen performs the essential work that may not always make headlines but transforms lives every day. With a background in advocacy, outreach, and community engagement, Eileen has dedicated her life to service. She leads one of the largest emergency food programs in Greater Boston with passion and determination, helping deliver over 114,000 bags of groceries to South Shore families in 2025 alone. She also ensures families receive often-overlooked necessities such as diapers, pads, and tampons, recognizing that dignity extends beyond food access. Through Interfaith's Joy for Children initiative, Eileen helps provide school supplies, Halloween costumes, and holiday gifts to children in need. Through her leadership and compassion, Eileen serves as a critical safety net for thousands of children and families. Her work exemplifies the power of community service rooted in dignity, empathy, and care, making her truly deserving of recognition as a Commonwealth Heroine.

**Nominated by State Senator John Keenan**



### **Leandra McLean, Sharon**

Leandra McLean is a Renaissance woman in the Town of Sharon. A former Health Administrator and Town Nurse, Leandra was at the helm as the town climbed out of the COVID-19 pandemic, and currently serves as a board member of the Sharon Substance Prevention And Resource Coalition (SSPARC), as well as the President of the Sharon Lions Club, working to raise and distribute money to local nonprofits with a focus on curing blindness. An RN for over 30 years, Leandra has mentored countless caregivers over her career with a passion for patient advocacy. For these reasons and more, she is truly a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Ted Philips



### **Linda Polach, Needham**

Linda Polach is a leading advocate for media literacy in the Commonwealth and country, helping to strengthen our democracy and empower citizens, especially young people. Over nearly four decades in Boston newsrooms, Linda produced critical coverage that informed and engaged Massachusetts audiences with accuracy and integrity. Beyond her distinguished newsroom career, Linda champions media literacy as the Massachusetts State Advocacy Lead for Media Literacy Now, a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring that K-12 students learn essential 21st-century skills to critically evaluate and responsibly use media. She has also begun taking her talents "on the road," traveling to schools in the Commonwealth to discuss these issues with students directly. In a time when misinformation and digital manipulation threaten civic discourse, her advocacy helps people, both young and old, become informed consumers and creators of media, an essential foundation for healthy participation in our communities and democracy.

Nominated by State Representative Josh Tarsky

## **PLYMOUTH COUNTY**



### **Kaitlyn Baker, Whitman**

Kaitlyn has been an advocate for the underserved for decades. Currently an ESL teacher in the Whitman school system, she is a fierce advocate for all students in her town who may be in need. She created a "closet" for children who may be in need of clothing or supplies in 2016, with the help of her father, when she was working in the Brockton schools. Seeing a need, she began filling it as best she could by reaching out to others who might have the items or have access to them. She understood that children learn best when their basic needs are met.

Co-nominated by:

State Senator Michael Brady and State Representative Alyson M. Sullivan-Almeida



### **Sophia Bethoney, Duxbury**

Sophia Bethoney is only 18, but she's already doing remarkable things for her community. With support from her parents, she is a regular at the senior centers throughout the South Shore. She began with a program called Singing with Seniors but expanded to much more. Now, as part of her daughter/dad duo, Sophia is taking their long-running podcast show on the road, going to 14 senior centers this year to talk about accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and the critical role they play for senior citizens. ADUs are her passion, which prompted her to create ADU Blessing. The goal: to build an ADU for a veteran in need. Sophia has been giving back to her community for several years. In 2022, she helped her mother run a medical supply drive to help Ukrainians. While the effort was dear to her heart, as her mother is from Ukraine, she wanted to help all Ukraine citizens suffering from the impact of the war. Already owner of her own company and the youngest person on record to be certified as a construction supervisor, Sophia wants to show other girls and young women what is possible for them in the male-dominated construction industry. It's worth pointing out Sophia does all of that while maintaining a 3.9 GPA and taking courses at Harvard University.

Nominated by State Representative Kenneth Swezey

### **Ann Cambra, Rochester**



Ann's first connection with seniors in need of help came through the Money Management program at Coastline. At the same time, she was a hospice volunteer for the Fairhaven Visiting Nurses Association, along with her golden doodle, Bob. One of her proudest achievements has been her work as an AARP tax aide. She was instrumental in opening up an AARP tax site at the Rochester COA. As her 15th year approaches, she is still amazed at the incredible volunteers who have made it their undertaking to help people, especially seniors, navigate the intimidating world of our tax system. The Rochester Senior Center has been an important place for Ann. She has been on the board of the Friends of the Rochester for 7 years, 3 of them as treasurer. It was her mission over the last 3 years to raise enough money to complete a much-needed (and many years in the making) addition to the center. Last year, the \$300,000.00 donation mark was obtained, and this year, the last \$100,000 will be raised. Finally, Ann has been on the Board of the Rochester Affordable Housing for the past eight years. They are a community-based non-profit organization working towards providing affordable housing for Rochester seniors and veterans.

**Nominated by State Senator Michael Rodrigues**

### **Jill Fearons, Mattapoisett**



Jill Fearons, mother of six, former elementary school teacher, and resident of Mattapoisett, is the founder and director of the Friends of Jack Foundation, established in 2019. Her experience navigating stressful hospital stays with her son, Jack, who survived Chiari Malformation, a condition in which brain tissue extends into the spinal canal, inspired her to address the critical need for often-overlooked healthcare programs and child life specialists that help children and families cope with frightening medical experiences. Under Jill's leadership, Friends of Jack is devoted to protecting children's mental, emotional, and physical well-being during medical treatment. It also funds the salaries and associated costs of child life specialists at hospitals throughout the South Coast of Massachusetts and Providence, ensuring sustained emotional care for children and families. Since becoming a recognized charity, Friends of Jack has raised over \$3.5 million entirely through individual donors and small businesses. Jill exemplifies the spirit of a Commonwealth Heroine, transforming personal hardship into lasting impact, strengthening pediatric care, and improving the lives of countless children and families.

**Nominated by State Representative Mark Sylvia**

### **Nancy Gardner, East Bridgewater**



Nancy is not only deeply loved by her two sons and husband, who believes she is the most amazing human, she is also a strong and compassionate leader in Massachusetts' disability and sarcoma communities. She is a devoted advocate, mentor, and community builder who works every day to ensure people with disabilities and cancer, especially sarcomas, are treated with dignity, respect, and humanity. When her son, who has autism, experienced trauma in public school, Nancy stepped in as his teacher, advocate, and steady support. She ensured he received a personalized education when the system failed him. At the same time, she led her local SEPAC so other families would not face similar harm. She turned her family's crisis into meaningful change for others. Nancy has built pathways for more families than can be counted. Through Operation House Call at The Arc of Massachusetts, she coordinates and supports co-teachers with intellectual and developmental disabilities and autism as they train future doctors to provide compassionate care. She serves on the DDS Human Rights Advisory Committee and supports families in need through the Arc of Greater Brockton Helping Hands Fund. Nancy offers constant support to mothers across the Commonwealth and even wrote a book to help families facing cancer find hope and joy. Massachusetts is stronger because of her leadership and heart.

**Nominated by State Representative Alyson M. Sullivan-Almeida**



### **Debra Garland, Brockton**

Deb has been an unsung heroine in her home city of Brockton for decades. Through her political activism, Deb supports political causes and issues that matter most to women and girls, seeking to ensure they maintain and expand the rights so many fought to achieve in the past amid the present-day assaults on women's rights. Deb currently serves as the elected President of Brockton's Democratic City Committee since 2018. Deb is also a coordinating member of Brockton's Indivisible group, where she helps plan and coordinate rallies and other events that organize Brockton-area residents against the authoritarian policies coming out of Washington, DC, and fight for an inclusive democracy for all. Through these volunteer efforts and her lifetime of political activism, Deb has helped get many women elected at the local, state, and national levels. Ms. Garland has served her entire community of Brockton as a leader who seeks out and lifts up other women, and it is my honor to include her in the 2026 Class of Unsung Heroines.

**Nominated by State Representative Michelle DuBois**

### **Lorren Gibbons, Cohasset**

Serving as Cohasset's Assistant Harbormaster from 1998 to 2006 and elevated to Harbormaster from 2006 to present, Lorri has dedicated herself to Cohasset's vibrant maritime community. As a committed public servant, she embodies harbor stewardship and ensures access to the waterfront for children and families, education and research projects, public recreation, commercial fisheries, and the blue economy. She goes above and beyond the job description with a constant eye to the sky. Whether it's late at night, in the gale winds, snow, or cold, she shows up for the people of Cohasset and saves lives in the process. She is regularly present at the landing during storm surges to monitor conditions closely and be fully prepared for stormy hours ahead. An old salt, residents rely on Lorri for guidance about weather and tide conditions and safe boating. Lorri is a former lobsterman, the only woman in the region to captain her own fishing vessel. She is a tireless advocate for waterfront equity, serving on multiple town committees, and always working quietly in the background to make Cohasset Harbor a treasured asset for the community. Lorri is an exceptional Harbormaster and an exceptional human being. We are deeply lucky to have her.

**Nominated by State Representative Joan Meschino**



### **Katherine Jackson, Plymouth**

Katherine is an architectural photographer with more than 15 years of professional experience and the owner of Katherine Jackson Architectural Photography. Alongside her photography career, Katherine is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and serves as an intern at Northeast Health Services, where she is expanding her skills in counseling, advocacy, and client support. Katherine brings a deep commitment to civic engagement and community leadership. She has volunteered with Plymouth for All and previously served on the Plymouth Land Use and Acquisition Committee. Since 2021, she has been an elected member of the Plymouth School Committee and currently serves as Vice Chair. In this role, she has participated in the Diversity Committee and the Plymouth Youth Development Collaborative to raise awareness and expand resources focused on substance use prevention and youth mental health. As a mother and wife, Katherine is deeply committed to education, student empowerment, and fostering inclusive, supportive environments for young people and families.

**Nominated by State Representative Michelle Badger**



### **Jeanne Kling, Halifax**

Jeanne is a dedicated educator and a pillar of her community of Halifax. Jeanne spent 40 years as an elementary and middle school special education teacher, where she was dedicated to educating her students with special needs. Jeanne is a dedicated member of her community, putting in the hard work to help her neighbors by serving in leadership roles on committees that support the local library, local seniors and town beautification efforts, as well as serving as a volunteer, helping deliver food to seniors through Meals on Wheels.

**Nominated by State Representative Kathleen LaNatra**





### **Carol Mattes, Hanover**

Carol has contributed her time and energy to ensure Hanover remains a happy, safe place for families to raise their children and for seniors to live. She served a two-year term as President of the Hanover Women's Club, and serves on the Civic Engagement and Outreach Committee overseeing a myriad of civic and community activities, including providing blankets for The Little Wanderers in Plymouth, Christmas gifts and books for veterans at Brockton Hospital, awarding three scholarships to graduating Hanover seniors continuing their education, and organizing Candidates' Night for the municipal election, just to name a few. Along with her husband Rick, she led the Republican Town Committee through many elections. Carol is a member of the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). She has also been to the State House to present her position in favor of parental rights. Carol works in the Office of the Assessor and the Town Clerk's Office. A long-time communicant of Saint Mary's, Carol is active in many parish activities and regularly attends the 9:20 a.m. Mass each Sunday.

**Nominated by State Representative David DeCoste**



### **Jacquelyn Rose, Bridgewater**

Passionate about community empowerment, democracy, and storytelling, Jacquelyn Rose is the imagineer, writer, and publisher behind BuzzAround. Jacquelyn began 17 years ago, one email newsletter/ week of East Bridgewater good news. These focused on town activities and efforts. The what, where, when, and how to get involved. BuzzAround now publishes to 27,000 subscribers, accentuating a narrative of giving, of civic duty, art creation and healthy living, supporting a healthy and sustainable community mindset. In just a 3-month period earlier this year, BuzzAround shared 1386 positive messages about non-profit activities, the arts, civic engagement, and just plain do-gooders in our weekly newsletters. Years of these weekly publications have resulted in enlivened involvement, and BuzzAround now publishes Bridgewater, Brockton, East Bridgewater, Halifax, Raynham, West Bridgewater, and Whitman. Seeing the broad positive social impact BuzzAround has had, Jacquelyn has made it her life's work to ensure BuzzAround remains an enduring benefit to society.

**Nominated by State Representative Rita Mendes**



### **Susan Runne, Pembroke**

Sue has dedicated her life to building a safer, more inclusive, and compassionate community. For more than two decades, she has been a steady presence through local service and advocacy, first through parent-teacher organizations and later through initiatives that expanded her impact far beyond her hometown. Following an active-shooter scare at her son's high school, Sue turned fear into action by becoming a volunteer leader with Moms Demand Action and the Be SMART Program, promoting responsible firearm storage and helping school districts adopt policies that provide families with critical safety information. She has served on Pembroke's Affordable Housing Committee, supported food security through annual community food drives, and led the Empty Bowl Project to benefit organizations addressing hunger and homelessness. She also actively organizes around issues affecting women, families, and underserved communities across the region. A strong ally to marginalized communities, Sue consistently leads with empathy and action. While balancing a full-time career, she demonstrates that compassion, persistence, and community engagement can create meaningful and lasting change.

**Nominated by State Senator Dylan Fernandes**



### **Liz Wiley, Wareham**

Liz Wiley of Wareham currently serves as Executive Director of the Marion Institute. She leads efforts to advance food justice, nutrition security, and health equity across Southeastern Massachusetts. Liz holds an MS in Organizational Management and Leadership from Antioch University-New England, where her thesis explored the 'Role of Women in Creating and Sustaining Resilient Communities'. Rooted in Southeastern Massachusetts, she is committed to reconnecting food, health, and community to create lasting, equitable impact.

**Nominated by State Senator Kelly Dooner**

# SUFFOLK COUNTY

## Asmaa Abou-Fouda, Revere



Asmaa has spent nearly two decades ensuring immigrant women and families in Revere have equal access to resources, representation, and opportunities. Originally from Egypt, she moved to Revere in 2008, raised five children in the city's public schools, and built a career dedicated to breaking down barriers that often leave immigrant communities underserved. As the City of Revere's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Assistant Director since 2020, Asmaa works daily to ensure all residents have a voice in decisions affecting their lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she became a vital resource for Arabic-speaking families by filming and interpreting the Mayor's public health messages in Arabic, providing accessible and lifesaving information during a critical time. Asmaa creates spaces where immigrant families can access resources and build community. She has also served on the City's Disability Commission, advocating for families of children with disabilities. Through every role she has held, Asmaa has worked to ensure immigrant women and girls feel informed, included, and empowered, making her a true Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Senator Lydia Edwards

## Edith Alexander, Roslindale



Edith Alexander is a compelling candidate for the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women Heroine Award for 2026 because of her sustained commitment to advancing equity, uplifting underserved communities, and empowering women across Boston. Through her leadership, advocacy, and hands-on service, she has consistently worked to break down barriers, amplify marginalized voices, and create meaningful opportunities for others to thrive. Her dedication reflects the spirit of grassroots impact and civic engagement that the Heroine Award seeks to honor, making her an outstanding representative of community-driven change in Massachusetts.

Nominated by State Representative Russell Holmes

## Maria Blasi, South Boston



Maria Blasi is a mother, small business owner, and school leader. Thanks to her leadership at St. Peter Academy, Maria has supported children during their foundational years while serving as a conduit between the school and the community, connecting neighbors and families to the school. As the owner and operator of Blasi's Kitchen & Bar, Maria generously supports countless community events and youth programs. Known for showing up quietly, consistently, genuinely, and without seeking recognition, Maria's dedication and devotion to her family, her neighbors, and her South Boston community make her a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative David Biele

## Meri Bond, Roslindale



Meri is an amazing community leader in the Roslindale neighborhood in the City of Boston. She has been involved in countless civic endeavors and has been a tireless advocate for her neighborhood, the City of Boston, and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. She is involved with the Prospect Hill Neighborhood Association (PHNA) and has recently led a much-needed community effort to beautify and rehabilitate a City of Boston bridge located in Roslindale. She is a civic giant in our city, and I am thrilled to nominate her as a Commonwealth Heroine for the year 2026.

Nominated by State Representative Rob Consalvo

## Catrina Cooley-Flagg, Boston



Through her leadership in organizing public safety meetings, Katrina brings residents, businesses, and city partners together to have meaningful conversations about keeping our neighborhoods safe, vibrant, and welcoming. She understands that public safety is built on communication, trust, and collaboration. Katrina helps strengthen relationships between neighbors and local agencies, ensuring that solutions are rooted in the real needs of the community. Her dedication to protecting Nubian Square and uplifting the people who live and work there reflects true grassroots leadership. Katrina exemplifies what it means to be a community champion, and her efforts make a lasting impact on the quality of life for so many. She is more than deserving of this award and our sincere appreciation.

Nominated by State Representative Chynah Tyler

### **Amy Epstein, Winthrop**



Amy Epstein is a seasoned leader in prevention and public health, bringing more than 20 years of experience to her role as Executive Director. Her commitment to strengthening protective factors for youth is rooted in decades of hands-on work with young people across diverse settings, from children’s museums to school communities. Recognized as a leader in youth development and prevention, Amy has dedicated her career to fostering environments where young people can thrive. She specializes in coalition-building, partnering with community stakeholders to create collaborative, sustainable strategies that reduce risk and promote positive outcomes. Through her strategic vision and community-centered approach, Amy works to cultivate healthier, safer communities for youth and families alike.

Nominated by State Representative Jeffrey Turco

### **Sasha Goodfriend, Jamaica Plain**



Sasha Goodfriend is the kind of person who invests in others. As a feminist organizer, she has rebuilt Mass NOW from the ground up and made it the first in its over 50-year history to have paid staff. Sasha has also been instrumental in bringing menstrual equity out of the dark and into the light for conversations related to menstruators’ health and wellness. Additionally, Sasha chaired the Massachusetts Commission on LGBTQ Youth through significant cultural and racial conversations and increased their budget. Sasha has also been a key leader in the LGBTQ movement, pushing for equity and access to power for populations often marginalized in the work.

Nominated by State Representative Samantha Montañó

### **Barbara Groover, Boston**



Rev. Groover has dedicated her life to uplifting others, both spiritually and practically. As Minister to Women and Families at the Historic Charles Street A.M.E. Church, she has been a steady and compassionate presence, supporting individuals and families through life’s most critical moments. Her leadership extends beyond the church walls, having served on boards such as Boston Aging Concerns and the Hyams Foundation’s Black Church Capacity Building Program, where she has helped strengthen communities and expand opportunities for those often underserved. Her journey demonstrates a lifelong commitment to growth, faith, and purpose. Whether mentoring women, guiding families, or contributing to community-based initiatives, Rev. Groover leads with humility, wisdom, and grace. In addition to her ministry, she has balanced a professional career in the private sector, modeling excellence and integrity in every space she occupies. Rev. Groover embodies what it means to be a Commonwealth Heroine—not because she seeks recognition, but because her consistent, quiet impact has transformed lives and strengthened our communities.

Nominated by State Representative Christopher Worrell

### **Edna Hall, Boston**



Edna Hall is a dedicated community steward and neighborhood advocate whose commitment to civic engagement and protecting community spaces in her neighborhood exemplifies grassroots leadership in Boston’s Mattapan community. As an active member of the Colorado Street Neighborhood Association, she works collaboratively with neighbors to address local concerns and strengthen community ties. Through consistent volunteerism, park caretaking, and engagement with residents, she plays a big role in strengthening and maintaining community spaces such as the Mattahunt Community Center, Hunt-Almont Park, and Mattahunt Woods. She helps ensure these public spaces remain accessible, welcoming, and safe for all those who access them. Her hands-on involvement reflects a deep sense of civic pride and demonstrates the power of community-driven care in sustaining and uplifting the neighborhood’s shared spaces. Through her steady presence and willingness to lead by example, Edna fosters a shared sense of responsibility among neighbors and strengthens the connections that make Mattapan a vibrant and resilient community. Her work embodies the spirit of the Commonwealth Heroine honor, recognizing individuals whose everyday acts of service create meaningful and lasting impact.

Nominated by State Representative Brandy Fluker-Reid



### **Lori Hooley, Charlestown**

For more than 20 years, Lori Hooley has served as a Certified Addiction Registered Nurse at Massachusetts General Hospital in Charlestown, devoting her career to helping others. For Lori, nursing is more than a profession—it is a calling. She genuinely cares about her patients and their well-being, consistently going above and beyond to ensure they receive the support they need. Her commitment extends beyond the completion of treatment, as she continues to follow up with patients to encourage and support their ongoing recovery. It is truly a blessing to have someone so deeply committed to assisting individuals struggling with addiction and mental health challenges. In my opinion, Lori Hooley is highly deserving of a Commonwealth Heroine Award in 2026.

Nominated by State Representative Daniel J. Ryan

### **Andrea Howard, Boston**

Andrea Howard has dedicated more than three decades to expanding opportunities for young people through transformative leadership in youth development. As Chief Executive Officer of West End House in Boston since 1999, Andrea returned to lead the organization at a critical moment when it faced the possibility of closing. Working alongside a committed board and staff, she helped transform West End House into one of the region's leading youth development organizations, serving hundreds of young people daily through programs focused on academics, leadership, career readiness, the arts, and health and wellness. A defining achievement of her leadership was the successful completion of the \$23.5 million Expect More Campaign, which expanded support through college graduation, strengthened career pathways for teens, improved facilities, and secured the organization's long-term sustainability. Andrea's work is rooted in the belief that young people are already capable, creative, and full of potential. As West End House prepares for its next chapter and a transformative \$50 million campaign, Andrea continues to create lasting impact for generations of young people and families.

Nominated by State Representative Kevin Honan



### **Yvette Jarreau, Boston**

Yvette moved to the South End of Boston in 2018, hoping to find friends and make meaningful contributions to a community. Mission accomplished. She connected with Marleen Nienhaus, founder of the Library Friends group, which led her from volunteer to her current role as leader of the Friends of the South End Library. Yvette's tireless advocacy over six years of upheaval—including two devastating floods that closed a vital neighborhood library—has been instrumental to the South End community. She has championed resources with BPL leadership, city councilors, and the Mayor's Office, helping drive the design of a new South End Library and is now pushing for the funding to build it. Yvette's determination and persistence have ensured that decision-makers never lose sight of the library's essential role in the community. Prior to retiring, she led efforts in leadership and organization development with a focus on growth and learning. She holds an MA in Marriage and Family Therapy and a BS in Marketing.

Nominated by State Representative John Moran



### **Ruth Khowais, Boston**

Ruth Khowais is a fixture of the Fenway community in Boston. As a decades-long resident of West Fenway, she is active in various civic efforts. She serves as the President of the Board of Directors of The Fenway News. The Fenway News is Boston's oldest nonprofit community paper. Since 1974, its free monthly newspaper has provided hyperlocal coverage of the Fenway, Mission Hill, Audubon Circle, and Kenmore. She has also served as a contributing writer, and her work in the community extends beyond the local news, as she also works with the 55 Bus Route Coalition, a group that advocates for reliable and resilient transportation on the 55 bus route since 2021 when the line was shut down and convinced the MBTA to restore the route. Outside of her civic engagement, she is an artist, her artwork has been shown at the Berklee College of Music and the Fenway Community Center. She is also a clinical psychologist, who works diligently with her patients on their mental health issues. She received her Masters in Counseling Psychology from Lesley College and her Psy.D. in Clinical Psychology from the Massachusetts School of Professional Psychology.

Nominated by State Representative Jay Livingstone



## Kristen McDonnell, West Roxbury

Kristen McDonnell is a dedicated educator, mentor, and championship-winning basketball coach whose impact extends far beyond the court. A resident of West Roxbury, Kristen has built a reputation as one of the most respected high school coaches in the region. Prior to coaching, Coach McDonnell was a standout basketball player at Boston Latin School and Stonehill College. Over the course of her coaching career, Kristen led the Braintree High School girls' team to four Division 1 State Championships. She then guided the Norwood High School boys' team to a Division 2 State Championship appearance before taking over the Norwood girls' program, leading them to a 19–4 record this past season. These extraordinary achievements reflect not only her deep knowledge of the game but also her ability to inspire excellence, resilience, and teamwork in her players. Under her guidance, her student-athletes exemplify discipline, integrity, and sustained success.



Kristen's influence reaches well beyond wins and titles. She is known for fostering a positive and empowering environment where student-athletes grow as both competitors and individuals. Her commitment to character development, academic accountability, and community values has left a lasting impression on countless young women who have come through her program. Colleagues and families alike recognize Kristen for her tireless work ethic, humility, and unwavering support of her players. She leads by example—balancing competitiveness with compassion—and consistently prioritizes her team's well-being and growth. For her exceptional achievements, leadership, and profound impact on her students and community, Kristen is a truly deserving candidate.

Co-nominated by State Representatives William MacGregor & John H. Rogers

## Glenola Mitchell, Mattapan

Glenola is a community leader whose work reflects a deep commitment to advocacy, public health, and neighborhood empowerment. As Board Chair of the Mattapan Community Health Center, she has played a critical role in advancing access to high-quality, culturally responsive care for residents across Boston. She has served on the Boston State Hospital Citizen's Advisory Committee, where she has helped shape discussions around neighborhood development, youth services, and community impact. Her advocacy consistently centers the voices and needs of residents—especially seniors, families, and young people—ensuring they are represented in decisions that affect their daily lives. Glenola has also been actively engaged in public safety and infrastructure conversations, including efforts to improve conditions along Blue Hill Avenue. Through her involvement at the Mildred Avenue Community Center, she has supported initiatives that foster intergenerational connection and expand access to resources for residents. Through decades of service, Glenola Mitchell exemplifies the spirit of a Commonwealth Heroine. Her leadership, compassion, and unwavering dedication continue to strengthen her community and inspire others to lead with purpose.



Nominated by State Senator Liz Miranda

## Tracy Nowicki, Chelsea

For more than 30 years, Tracy has dedicated her career to the people of Chelsea, rising from a secretary in the executive and law offices to Director of Elder Services, and now Director of Health & Human Services for the City of Chelsea. At every stage, she has met challenge with action, service, and heart. Tracy began her career during one of the most difficult chapters in Chelsea's history, serving through the state-appointed receivership and the transition to a council-manager form of government. As the city rebuilt, so did she, steadily taking on greater responsibility and using each opportunity to expand her impact. Her leadership has never been about titles. It has been about results for residents. As Director of Elder Services, Tracy championed a free transportation system that allowed older adults to remain independent and connected to medication, groceries, social opportunities, and the Chelsea Senior Center. Raised in a hardworking single-parent household, Tracy learned perseverance, accountability, and compassion from her late mother. Though she faced barriers to higher education, she built a career defined not by obstacles but by impact. Her life's work reflects the very spirit of the Commonwealth Heroine Award: steady leadership, quiet strength, and a lifelong commitment to lifting others.



Nominated by State Representative Judith Garcia

## Jane O'Reilly, East Boston



Jane O'Reilly is an author, activist, and leader in the feminist movement whose work has inspired generations of women. Raised in St. Louis, she graduated from Radcliffe College in 1958 before moving to NYC, where she helped shape the modern feminist movement. Alongside her close friend Gloria Steinem, Jane co-founded Ms. magazine and wrote its first cover story, "Click! The Housewife's Moment of Truth," a groundbreaking piece that captured women's growing awareness of inequality in everyday life. She also built an accomplished career as a freelance writer, contributing regularly to The New York Times, Time, Vogue, and New York magazine as a political reporter and columnist focused on issues affecting women. Today, she remains active in her community as a fair housing advocate and amateur printmaker. A mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother, Jane continues to be an inspiring and joyful force for social justice and community engagement.

Nominated by State Representative Adrian Madaro

## Eileen Ryan, Watertown



Eileen founded Beyond Plastics Greater Boston and is a member of the Steering Committee of Plastic Free Massachusetts, where she helped to pass the single-use plastic shopping bag ban in Watertown. She is also a member of Watertown's Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Committee. Eileen serves on the Steering Committee of Indivisible Progressive Watertown, is a member of the Watertown Democratic Committee, and leads the Watertown Walks for Peace Team in support of the Louis D. Brown Peace Institute's Mother's Day Walk for Peace. In Boston, she volunteers as a tour guide with Boston by Foot and can be found on the steps or in the halls of the State House championing vital legislation. She is well known for engaging her creative skills to create unique and meaningful costumes and signs for climate and social justice causes. She is the mother of three grown children and the grandmother of two.

Nominated by State Senator William Brownsberger

## Minnah B. Sheikh, Revere



A proud Revere native, Minnah has dedicated her career to public service, grassroots organizing, and coalition-building. Minnah has managed and supported more than ten electoral and issue-based campaigns at the municipal, legislative, and statewide levels, including ballot question initiatives. Her work has helped elect local leaders, shape public policy outcomes, and build durable grassroots infrastructure across the Commonwealth. She has served as a Community Captain for Senator Ed Markey's re-election campaign and as a Regional Organizing Director during the 2022 gubernatorial cycle, taking on leadership roles that required strategic vision, persistence, and a deep commitment to voter engagement. Minnah's dedication to service is evident in her work as Organizing Lead for A Healthier Democracy, where she helped register low-income patients for federal benefits across ten health clinics in Boston and Houston—meeting people where they are and ensuring access to critical resources. Minnah continues to serve as Chair of the Revere Democratic City Committee and member of the Massachusetts Democratic State Committee. Minnah Sheikh is an Unsung Heroine in the truest sense—steadfast, principled, and deeply committed to empowering others.

Nominated by State Representative Jessica Giannino

## Katherine Tallman, Boston



Kathy was appointed Executive Director & CEO of Coolidge Corner Theatre Foundation in 2013. Much of her career was in financial services including public accounting, State Street and AEW Capital Management. Under her leadership and working with an exceptional staff and board, the Coolidge was transformed from a beloved local movie house that opened in 1933 to a nationally renowned independent cinema and education center. She built a dedicated donor and membership base; co-chaired a capital campaign that funded a 14,000 square foot expansion, adding a large lobby, two new theatres, and an education center. She expanded educational initiatives for adults and youth, including a pro bono program for middle and high school students that is hosting 4,000 students; secured a permanent endowment; and enriched the Coolidge's role as a community gathering place and neighborhood economic engine. Today, the Coolidge welcomes over 300,000 patrons a year and hosts many film festivals and community events. Kathy retired in March 2026, leaving behind a financially stable organization and an extraordinarily talented and dedicated team.

Nominated by State Representative Tommy Vitolo

## Nicola Truppin, Boston



Nicola has over 25 years of experience in health care and currently runs a private practice guiding individuals through the complexities of the American health care system. Since 2005, she has been actively involved in statewide initiatives to ensure that patients' perspectives are represented in health care policy and practice. She collaborated closely with the consumer advocacy organization Health Care for All to advance health reform in Massachusetts and support the effective implementation of the state's Patient Family Advisory Committee (PFAC) law. Ms. Truppin is a founding member of Massachusetts Health Care Advocates (MAHCA) and was also part of the now-defunct statewide Patient Family Advisory Council Board of Health Care for All. She served for five years as the Patient Representative on the Quality & Patient Safety Committee within the Massachusetts Board of Registration in Medicine and has consulted on several projects at the Betsy Lehman Center for Patient Safety. Nicola also serves as president of the Pilot Block Neighborhood Association in the South End, where she leads meetings, advocates for neighborhood improvements, organizes community events, and fosters civic engagement among residents. She is a key leader of the newly revived South End Forum, playing a central role in connecting local organizations and creating a space for neighborhood dialogue and collaboration.

Nominated by State Senator Nick Collins

## WORCESTER COUNTY

## Jill Ashton, Clinton



Jill Ashton is a Commonwealth Heroine because of her longstanding commitment to advancing the rights, opportunities, and well-being of women across Massachusetts and beyond. With over a decade of service with the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women, Jill worked to elevate critical issues impacting women and families, helping to shape policy conversations at both the state and national levels. Her leadership extended nationally through her involvement with the National Association of Commissions for Women and the U.S. Women's Bureau, where she represented Massachusetts with distinction and helped amplify the voices of women across the country. Today, Jill continues her advocacy through her work with the International Association of Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers, supporting working families and promoting equity in the labor force. Her career reflects a deep and sustained dedication to public service, gender equity, and economic justice. Jill's impact is both meaningful and far-reaching, making her truly deserving of recognition as a Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Meghan Kilcoyne

## Suchira Chanoi, Worcester



Suchira Chanoi came to this community with determination, built deep expertise over nearly two decades, and dedicates that expertise to the children who need it most. Born in Thailand, Suchira came to the United States as an au pair. She chose to stay, to learn, and to build a life in Worcester. She earned her Master's degree in Early Childhood Education from Worcester State University and today serves as the Curriculum and Instructional Support Specialist at Worcester Child Development Head Start, a federally funded program serving hundreds of low-income children and families. She also serves as an adjunct professor, shaping future early childhood educators in the classroom. As Curriculum and Instructional Support Specialist, her impact extends beyond her own program. She was among the teacher-developers who helped create the Seeds of STEM curriculum and was among the first to test each unit in her own classroom — a \$1.5 million U.S. Department of Education-funded initiative ultimately tested in 36 Head Start classrooms across Worcester. She also presents her work to fellow educators regionally, including for the Boston Area Reggio Inspired Network on how inquiry groups can create spaces for staff and families to engage in shared reflection on children's learning. Her love of learning does not stop at her classroom door. She is currently a doctoral candidate in STEM Leadership at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, pursuing her highest academic credential while working full time. A great teacher is always, first, a great learner. Suchira lives that belief every day.

Nominated by State Representative David LeBoeuf

## Claire Freda, Leominster



Claire has dedicated a life of service to the Leominster community for more than four decades. She is currently the longest serving elected official in the City of Leominster, starting out on the Leominster School Committee, then representing Ward 3 on the City Council, and most recently as an At-Large City Councilor. She is currently serving as City Council President, which for the first time, has a majority female membership. Claire fosters leaders in municipal government throughout the Commonwealth, serving on the Massachusetts Municipal Association Board of Directors for 25 years, a 10 year member of the Executive Board, and was the First City Councilor to serve as MMA President in 2000. Her service continues throughout our region, as the Chair of Mount Wachusett Community College Board of Trustees, a more than 25 year member of the Leominster Rotary Club, serving multiple times as its President, is a Past President of the Corporate Board of Catholic Charities Worcester and Board Member for 25 years. Claire is a proud Gold Star Wife, widow of Ron Freda/Vietnam War Combat Veteran and DAV Auxiliary, mother to Kelley and Anthony, and grandmother to Patrick, who serves in the United States Coast Guard. We are thankful for her commitment to our community and proud to nominate her.

Nominated by State Representative Natalie Higgins

## Patricia Freiss, Leominster



Pat is a lifelong resident of Leominster and the true embodiment of what the Commonwealth Heroine Award represents — quiet, consistent, and extraordinary service to her community. Since 2013, Pat has been a steadfast volunteer at Ginny's Helping Hand. Quite simply, she is the backbone of their daily operations. Pat volunteers virtually every single day that they are open. She rarely misses a shift and can always be counted on — not just to show up, but to lead by example. Her dedication is not occasional or seasonal; it is unwavering and constant. As a retired Registered Nurse, Pat brings with her a lifetime of compassion, professionalism, and care for others. She treats every individual who walks through their doors with dignity and respect. Her calm presence, work ethic, and deep sense of service set the tone for "Team Ginny's" each day. Pat represents the very best of what local volunteerism looks like — humble, reliable, and deeply committed to helping others without expectation of recognition. The Commonwealth Heroine Award honors women who make a difference behind the scenes, and there is no one more deserving of that recognition than Pat Freiss. Her service to the community have touched thousands of lives, often in ways that will never make headlines but matter tremendously to the families being served.

Nominated by State Senator John J. Cronin

## Karen Henderson, Westborough



A longtime Westborough resident and General Manager of Westborough TV since 2014, Karen Henderson is a devoted leader who has spent decades strengthening the fabric of her community. Under her leadership, Westborough TV earned the prestigious ACM Award for Overall Excellence in Public Access, a national honor recognizing her commitment to professional excellence, local storytelling, and community engagement. Karen embodies the true spirit of service, acting as an advocate and mentor for Westborough's families and students. Her dedication to empowering the next generation is evident in her roles through the years on the boards of the Charlotte Spinney Scholarship Program and Project Graduation, as well as her hands-on work mentoring journalism students from both Westborough High School and Assabet Valley Regional Technical High School. A past recipient of the Corridor 9/495 Regional Chamber Leadership Award, Ms. Henderson is recognized for empowering others through business and community contributions. Through her former service on the School Committee, the Economic Development Committee, and years of coaching youth athletics, she consistently goes above and beyond as a role model. Her selfless advocacy and quiet mentorship continue to make a lasting, meaningful impact on Westborough.

Co-nominated by State Representatives Kate Donaghue and Hannah Kane



### **Theresa Hicks, Uxbridge**

Theresa is a dedicated healthcare leader who has spent over 28 years serving the UMass system with unwavering excellence. Currently serving as the Director of Executive and Concierge Medicine, Theresa is far more than an administrator; she is a vital lifeline for patients and their families. The Commonwealth's healthcare landscape can be complex to navigate, especially during times of medical crisis. Theresa distinguishes herself by going above and beyond to ensure no one feels lost in the system. She approaches every interaction with deep compassion, guiding families through their care journeys with a personal touch that is rare in modern medicine. Her career is a testament to the impact one individual can have when they lead with their heart. By combining decades of institutional expertise with a genuine desire to help others, Theresa has made an indelible mark on the well-being of our community and the Commonwealth.

Nominated by State Senator Ryan Fattman



### **Kelly Hitt, West Brookfield**

Kelly is the Director of the West Brookfield Senior Center. She is bright, caring, and compassionate. Her dedication to the seniors and to introducing programs that keep everyone interested and involved is evident. Her center is always full of people, and her heart is open and giving. She deserves this award because of the wonderful person she is.

Nominated by State Representative Donald Berthiaume



### **Lori Hout, Douglas**

Lori supervises the Jail Diversion Program run by The Blackstone Valley Connector program; a jail diversion initiative that partners with local police to provide mental health, psychoeducation, and case management services. It helps families in crisis and reduces unnecessary arrests. Beyond that, Lori's extensive experience in elder services, family support, case management, and addiction recovery make her an active member and strong driving force behind a multitude of volunteer-based Community organizations; including the CHNA 6 Steering Committee, the Community Benefits Committee at Milford Regional Medical Center, and the Blackstone Valley Interagency Coalition. Despite wearing many, many hats, Lori is always the very first to step up, to ask 'what else can I do,' for the community.

Nominated by State Representative Joseph McKenna



### **Deborah Johnson, Dudley**

Deborah Johnson embodies the spirit of The Commonwealth Heroine Award in every way. One of six children, Deborah has spent her life devoted to family, work, and community. She and her husband, Jon Johnson, have been married for 56 years and have lived in Dudley since 1978, where they raised two sons. While supporting her family, Deborah worked full time at Cranston Print Works in Webster and pursued her education part time at Nichols College, becoming the first in her family to earn a college degree. Now retired at 76 years young, Deborah continues to devote her time and energy to serving others. As the Director of the Dudley Senior Center, she works to organize meals, social events, dementia clinics, and other vital services that improve the lives of local seniors. She spearheaded much-needed updates and renovations by securing private funding through a grant and mobilizing additional support from the Dudley Women's Club, successfully obtaining all necessary funds herself. Deborah's contributions extend across the community. She has been a tireless volunteer for over four decades, supporting Abby's House, a Worcester County women's shelter, to long-standing service to St. Anthony of Padua Church, where she continues to serve as a lector, acolyte, and volunteer bookkeeper. She also remains an active member of both the Dudley Women's Club (since 2012) and local veterans' initiatives, offering help and compassion wherever it is needed. The Commonwealth Heroine Award recognizes women whose leadership and commitment strengthen the fabric of their communities. Deborah Johnson exemplifies this spirit—her work has left an indelible mark on Dudley and beyond. She is a quiet force for good and a model of dedication, compassion and leadership and could not be more deserving of this recognition.

Nominated by State Representative John Marsi

## Anahit Marutyan, Worcester



Anahit Marutyan is a Presidential Scholar and first-year Political Science major with a minor in International Development at Clark University. A Dean's List honoree with First Honors, she has already distinguished herself as a thoughtful leader committed to strengthening both her campus and broader community. Anahit serves on the City of Worcester Human Rights Commission, where she works collaboratively to promote inclusion, civic engagement, and community partnership. In 2025, she personally authored and secured the passage of the Armenian American Heritage Month Proclamation in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, achieving statewide recognition of Armenian American history and contributions. This accomplishment reflects her initiative, determination, and ability to turn vision into tangible impact. On campus, Anahit serves as Vice President of the Student Alumni Relations Committee, building bridges between students and alumni and fostering a strong sense of community. As a Student Ambassador for Undergraduate Admissions and a Student Assistant at the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, she supports programs that encourage dialogue, learning, and meaningful engagement. Fluent in Armenian, Russian, and English, with elementary proficiency in Spanish, Anahit brings a global perspective to her leadership. She aspires to pursue a career in law, guided by a commitment to service, integrity, and strengthening the communities she represents.

Nominated by State Senator Robyn Kennedy

## Tracey Philips, Hopedale



Tracey Philips has contributed a significant amount of time and effort on a volunteer basis for the Town of Hopedale for a number of years. She has served as the key organizer for several community events, including the Fairy Walk through the town's parklands with miniature houses and fairy tale characters set out, the Winter Stroll throughout historic and business locations in the town, the Halloween and Thanksgiving presentations for businesses in the community and the homeowners' Christmas decoration contest. These are beloved community events which attract many people well beyond Hopedale and generate revenue that benefits volunteer organizations such as The Friends of Historic Hopedale and The Friends of Hopedale Elders. Tracey organizes all volunteers, lines up the vendors, handles the marketing and coordinates all donations for these events, as a volunteer herself. Tracey Philips is truly devoted to her community in Hopedale and a true Commonwealth Heroine.

Nominated by State Representative Brian Murray

## Victoria Selser, Sterling



Victoria Selser is an Epidemiologist with the City of Fitchburg Health Department and the Montachusett Public Health Network, a regional collaborative of local health departments in north central MA. Her public health journey began during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, just as she was completing her undergraduate degree in microbiology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. As Massachusetts was scaling up the pandemic response, Victoria joined the public health workforce in April 2020 as a Contact Tracer for the Community Tracing Collaborative (CTC) – a joint project between the Massachusetts Department of Public Health and the global health nonprofit Partners in Health (PIH). She later transferred to the specialized unit within the CTC known as the Epidemic Intelligence Unit, where her role as an Outbreak Specialist involved collaborating with local health departments to identify, investigate, and respond to suspected outbreaks of COVID-19.

Victoria's experience of working with PIH shaped her views on health equity and justice and fostered her commitment to improving health outcomes. Following the closure of the CTC in December 2021, Victoria transitioned to her current role as a local health Epidemiologist. In this role, her responsibilities range from analyzing data to evaluate community health needs to administering community-based clinical and educational public health interventions, to grant-writing, to managing and responding to reportable conditions. Most notably, Victoria identified gaps in healthcare access in her communities and worked to establish a free clinic, now formally known as the North Central Free Medical Program. She also currently serves on NACCHO's Epidemiology Workgroup.

Nominated by State Representative Mike Kushmerek

## Karen Spencer, Uxbridge

Karen is a Commonwealth Heroine because of her unwavering dedication to empowering young girls and strengthening communities across Worcester County. As Executive Director of Girls on the Run Worcester County since 2014, Karen has transformed a small pilot program serving just 69 girls at three sites into a thriving, countywide initiative reaching thousands of participants each year. Through her leadership, the program has expanded to serve communities across nearly every town in the region, ultimately impacting more than 6,000 girls. Karen's work goes far beyond program growth. She has championed a mission that combines physical activity with social-emotional learning, helping girls build confidence, develop healthy relationships, and navigate real-life challenges such as bullying, peer pressure, and self-doubt. Her commitment was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when she took a personal pay cut and led creative fundraising efforts to ensure the program could continue serving girls during a time of isolation and uncertainty. Under Karen's leadership, Girls on the Run Worcester County has also prioritized accessibility and inclusion by securing funding and scholarships so that all girls, regardless of background, can participate. She has built strong partnerships with schools, volunteers, and community organizations, creating a lasting network of support for youth. Karen Spencer's vision, resilience, and passion have made a profound and lasting impact, inspiring thousands of girls to recognize their potential and become confident, compassionate leaders in their communities. This is all why Karen is without a doubt a Commonwealth Heroine.



Co-nominated by State Representatives Michael Soter and Joseph McKenna

## Karen Swindell, Milford

Karen Swindell is a mother, educator, and advocate for those living with substance use disorder. She and her husband Dave raised their family in Milford. After a series of sports injuries that introduced their son Christopher to oxycontin, the family began to grapple with his substance use. In 2018, after years of support groups and on the night before his sister's wedding, Chris passed away due to a relapse. Amazingly, and inspirationally, Karen channeled this immense heartbreak into giving back to the community her son and her family loved so much. In August of 2019, one year after Chris's death, Karen and Dave held Milford's first Overdose Awareness Day. Soon after that, Karen began working with Amy Leone of Community Impact, an organization that offers services specializing in opioids and alcohol use treatment. Through Worcester County District Attorney Early's office, they secured a Department of Justice grant for over \$1 million to open a new center in Milford, named after her son, to treat members of the community. Chris' Corner opened its doors in the Spring of 2020. Karen is still a regular presence at Chris' Corner, serving as a dedicated volunteer and group facilitator. Karen has supported countless parents—especially mothers—who are navigating the unimaginable loss of a child. Karen embodies Chris' message and carries it forward through her life's mission: to support others, build community, and remind people they are not alone.



Nominated by State Representative Becca Rausch

## Theresa Thompson, Gardner

Theresa serves as Manager of Philanthropy and Community Engagement at Heywood Hospital, where she plays a key role in strengthening organizational culture and promoting community well-being. She leads major fundraising initiatives, including the Annual Golf Tournament and capital campaigns, and coordinates vital outreach efforts such as the Weekend Backpack Program and Heywood's Employee Wellness Committee. Deeply committed to community health, Theresa works to advance strategic goals and ensure sustainable, accessible local healthcare for future generations. Her life beyond the workplace has been equally defined by service. Theresa's dedication to volunteerism and leadership has earned her numerous honors. Theresa's impact spans civic, nonprofit, and youth-focused organizations. She has held leadership and volunteer roles with the Women's Circle of Giving, the Fitchburg, Leominster, and Gardner Boys & Girls Clubs, Gardner CAC, and Girls on the Run. She has chaired fundraisers, served on advisory boards, coached youth, organized food distribution efforts, and participated in Wreaths Across America to honor fallen heroes. Known for her collaborative spirit and hands-on approach, Theresa exemplifies servant leadership. Her commitment to helping others strengthens the region she proudly calls home, inspiring others to give back with purpose and passion.



Nominated by State Senator Peter Durant



### **Shannon Wall, Shrewsbury**

Shannon is a dedicated and engaged community leader deeply committed to strengthening the community she loves through volunteerism and civic involvement. Shannon currently serves as President of the Shrewsbury Rotary Club, as a Trustee at the New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill, and as an elected Town Meeting Member representing her neighbors. Shannon also served for five years on the Spring Street School PTO and three years teaching CCD at Saint Mary's Parish. Shannon has also partnered with the Treehouse Foundation to help establish an intergenerational foster care community in Central Massachusetts and leads the women's group at her place of employment, which participates in community service opportunities throughout the year. Shannon is driven by a belief that strong communities are built through service, empathy, and collaboration, and is truly a heroine to those who benefit from her contributions.

**Nominated by State Representative Hannah Kane**



## The Meaning of the Yellow Rose



The yellow rose is a prominent symbol for suffragists, representing support for women's right to vote. Women struggled for years to be included in the Constitution as voting members of the population. Courageous suffragists faced jail, hunger strikes, years of organizing, ridicule, and great disappointment before ultimately achieving full suffrage when the 19th Amendment was fully ratified in 1920. They came from rural and urban backgrounds, different economic classes, different races, and different generations, but shared one goal: **equal rights and opportunities for all.**

They worked together. Diversity became their strength as they united under a symbol: the yellow rose. The yellow rose stood for unity, friendship, and determination. Today, the yellow rose reminds us that our own work to improve the status of women in the Commonwealth is ongoing, and requires diversity, unity, and determination. We must strive for victory in our own peaceful revolutions.

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