



★ 2024 ★ Shining Stars of Nacogdoches

The Daily Sentinel celebrates Nacogdoches County's outstanding young professionals with its Shining Stars program. Nominations were accepted from the public in October and a selection committee selected these 18 individuals as the second class of honorees.

★ The Daily Sentinel



Congratulations to the

★ 2024 ★ Shining Stars of Nacogdoches

Let's celebrate the incredible young leaders who are shaping the future of Nacogdoches! Their passion, drive, and innovative spirit are essential to building a stronger, more vibrant community.

It is with great pride that we honor this distinguished group of Nacogdoches leaders.

Your commitment to our community is truly inspiring. Your dedication to leadership, strong work ethic, and service to others are fundamental to our community's success.

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About this section

The Daily Sentinel's 2024 Shining Stars special section is a celebration of outstanding individuals who are making significant contributions to Nacogdoches County.

The Shining Stars for 2024 were chosen from a list of nominees submitted by readers in October with a committee selecting this year's honorees.

The individuals recognized as this year Shining Stars have established themselves as leaders in their respective fields while also living out a bold commitment to their community. The 2024 class serves in varied roles and have made Nacogdoches County a better place through both professional excellence and service.

The list is a snapshot of Nacogdoches County's wide array of talent and community partners. This year's list includes business owners, veterans, nonprofit leaders, artists, entrepreneurs, educators, managers and directors.

The members play key roles in a variety of local service organization and boards including the Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce, Junior Forum, Christian Women's Job Corps, Hero Foundation, Jaycees, Rotary and others.

Learn more about the honorees on the following pages.

Hollie Atherton, 26

Operations Manager, NacSpace

Education: Central Heights ISD High School, Some SFA - Biochemistry

What path led you to your chosen profession?

NacSpace is a branch company of Elliott Electric Supply. I started working at Elliott Electric at 19 years old as an executive assistant to the CIO when I noticed the love that Bill Elliott has for Nacogdoches. Bill and Phil Hale decided to open a center for Information Technology in Nacogdoches to provide state-of-the-art IT services to the Nacogdoches community as Nacogdoches businesses were outsourcing this service to larger cities. I jumped at the opportunity to move to the sales/community outreach position with NacSpace. I worked as a sales team member for three years before moving to Sales team manager once the team expanded. After sales manager, I was able to move into my current role, Operations Manager, where I manage the service technician team along with an IT manager, the sales team, and our supporting staff such as assistants, project managers and warehouse. I have been with NacSpace 7 years and love the people that I work with and our clients.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

President-elect of the Pilot International Club of Nacogdoches, member of the Nacogdoches Rotary Club, Action Committee Member for the Nacogdoches Hero Foundation, member of the Nacogdoches Chamber of Commerce and member/Recording Secretary of the Nacogdoches Main Street Advisory Board

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

While on the Nacogdoches Main Street Advisory Board, we created the Nacogdoches Main Street Beautification grant for downtown business and living areas to apply for grants up to \$1,500 to enhance the beauty of downtown. We have awarded \$10,000 grants to local business to improve downtown. These grants not only help the individuals receiving the funds but the community as a whole. When our town is taken care of, we can increase tourism for our community.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Since NacSpace started, I have worked with our team leads and our president to increase our employee size from around 45 individuals to over 100 employees serving our communities' IT needs. My team has also implemented student engagement programs that include paid internships for students attending



Stephen F. Austin University and classroom engagement for middle school or high school students at our local school districts. I have scheduled tours of NacSpace, classroom visits, teacher externships, and student shadowing with five local school districts to date to get students interested in technology as a career.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

My personal achievement that I am most proud of would be raising my three daughters. I have a five year old, two year old, and one year old. Our girls keep my husband and I busy, but we would not change it for the world!

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts." – Winston Churchill

What are your hobbies?

Playing tennis, attending Friday night football games, spending time with our kids

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

My favorite tradition with my family would be our Christmas Eve traditions. Each year, we gift our children with matching pajamas, their favorite snack, and a Christmas themed movie. We then spend Christmas Eve watching the movie with the kids.

Mariko Badders, 33

Attorney, Badders Law Firm

Education: BA from Wake Forest University; JD from South Texas College of Law

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I knew I wanted to be an attorney when I was about 6 years old. I was inspired by Judge Judy ... yes, the TV show. I saw how she had the power as a lawyer to right a wrong situation. I wanted to do that. I also heard from my parents and numerous teachers that my clear passion for arguing would make me a good attorney one day. I guess that was a positive spin on a very annoying trait I had as a child.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Board member for Nacogdoches Education Foundation; Board member for Nacogdoches Hero Foundation; member of the Texas Trial Lawyers; member of the Nacogdoches Bar Association; Badders Law Firm is a supporter of the Heartbeat Pregnancy Center, Solid Foundation and the Boys and Girls Club.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

I am a fifth-generation Army veteran, and therefore supporting veterans is something I care a lot about. I feel so blessed to be part of a community that respects and honors veterans as well as our law enforcement and first responders. Last year I had the honor of helping start the Nacogdoches Hero Foundation by setting up the 501C3 and assist in the formation and legal work needed. As a result, I've seen this organization honor those who have served and even died for our community and nation and provide assistance to those in our community. I'm honored to be a part of this organization.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Last year I tried a case in Nacogdoches County where a man was severely hurt as a result of the negligence of another company. I watched this company change their story, lie about my client, and deny any responsibility. I then watched the other side send low ball offers because they didn't believe a small county like Nacogdoches would award my client the money he needed because of the economic status of our county and the color of my client's skin. I went to trial not just to ensure my client got justice, but to make sure every Dallas and Houston lawyer knew that Nacogdoches would always be fair and just to everyone. Sure enough, justice prevailed and my client was fairly compensated (more than 50 times what the defense ever offered).

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

My service in the military. I joined the army at 18-years-old. I was in the National Guard while I attended college. I had never



run more than a mile in my life and actually failed my first PT test. I was ready to quit every day for the first year. I didn't think I was physically or even mentally tough enough to be a soldier, let alone an officer. Over the next four years I worked harder than I ever had and pushed myself further than I ever thought possible. I went from failing the PT test to maxing out the PT test and graduated as a distinguished military graduate ranking in the top 4% in the nation. After I commissioned as a 2LT in the Army I joined the Army Reserves and served as a General's Aide. I was fortunate to watch some of the greatest leaders in our military in action. The Army taught me a lot about strength, grit and honor. They are values I carry to this day and that I implement every day in my civilian life.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

Isaiah 42:4- "He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails."

What are your hobbies?

I love spending time with my family every chance I can. We enjoy taking care of our tortoise Leo, dog Birdie, pig Rooster, rabbit Pickles, our miniature horses, and herd of miniature cows.

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

My favorite tradition is spending Christmas morning reading the birth of Jesus with my kids

Any other information you would like to include?

I'm honored to receive this award and grateful for this wonderful community.

Congratulations!
Mariko Badders
Nominated Shining Star



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IN THE COMMUNITY.



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Leigh Anne Carver, 41

Manager, Marketing and Community Relations, Nacogdoches Medical Center

Education: Sociology, SFA

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I chose Nacogdoches Medical Center primarily because of the people who work here and the opportunity for me to give back to the community I love.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Nacogdoches Area Cancer Coalition, President; Nacogdoches Chamber of Commerce, Board Member; SFA School of Nursing, Advisory Board Member; Leadership Nac 2024/2025

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Being the president of Nacogdoches Area Cancer Coalition is by far the most rewarding part of my volunteer efforts. Helping cancer patients and their families is such a heartwarming, humbling experience.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

My children, Max Carver (8) and Bird "Birdog" Carver (4) are my biggest (and loudest) achievements. Those tiny clowns keep us laughing and fill my heart with joy every day.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"Carry out a random act of kindness, with no expectation of reward, safe in the knowledge that one day someone might do the same for you." – Princess Diana

I am under the strong belief that you can always choose to be kind, regardless of the situation.

What are your hobbies?

Spending time with family, giving back to the community and



cheering on the Lufkin Panther football team.

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Family dinners is a tradition I hold near and dear to my heart. We get together at least once or twice a month at my mom's house to eat, laugh and gather as a big fun family.

Any other information you would like to include?

Although I'm not a "BIN", I have been a Nac resident for the last 22 years and they have embraced me as one of their own. I truly love everything about Nacogdoches, the beautiful scenery, the rich history, and best of all, the amazing people. Thank you, Nacogdoches, for becoming the only place I ever want to be.

Henry Dekoeyer, 32

Business Development Manager, Express Employment Professionals

Education: University of North Texas

What path led you to your chosen profession?

The desire to leave my comfort zone

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Nacogdoches Rotary, East Texas Oil and Gas Association, Lufkin/Nacogdoches Chess Club, Nacogdoches Jaycees

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

I take pride in the Wednesday Rotary project to repair Nacogdoches trails.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Building a successful business that allowed me to move to Nacogdoches and build a house.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Creating and maintaining a strong family and friend group

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"But how could you live and have no story to tell" - Fyodor Dostoevsky

What are your hobbies?



Chess, golf, fishing, hiking and camping

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Taking a yearly road trip.

Claire Drewery, 36

Owner, Spring and Prince Boutique and Nacogdoches Home Design

Education: Texas Christian University, 2010; Nacogdoches High School, 2006

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I have always had a passion for style and business – and in that order. My father who is a contractor and mother who owned a flooring and lighting store in Nacogdoches taught me that "if you do what you are passionate about and makes you happy, you will never work a day in your life!" And if you get lucky, you might even be able to make a business out of it.

Since I can remember, I have always loved, fashion, home decor, decorating, architecture (especially old buildings with lots of history and details), a good DIY project, anything creative and especially shopping. I like the thrill of the hunt weather it's finding a new favorite brand or product or a unique find at an antique store.

After high school, I attended college at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, where I majored in marketing/advertising. But I was that girl in college that helped all the girls pick out what they were going to wear that night and the girl that helped my friends decorate their dorm room or apartment. Let's just say in my four years at TCU, I moved lots of furniture, put too many holes in walls hanging pictures and made frequent trips to Target to help them buy new home decor.

After college, I was determined to get a job and move to New York City to learn more about the fashion and interior design industry. After five years of learning and working for some amazing companies in the city as an apparel and homegoods buyer, I decided to cash in my chips and move back to Texas to be closer to family.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do for work when I made the move back until my now husband and parents encouraged me to start something of my own and open a store with all the things I love here in my hometown, Nacogdoches. In 2015 Spring and Prince came to life. A store filled with home decor, gifts, kids and women's clothing in a beautiful historic building that my dad and I renovated in downtown Nacogdoches. I didn't really have a plan for what the store would be or end up being. I just went with my gut and filled it with all the things I love and hoped it would work. Ten years later, the store is still open and doing well thanks to the community and now has a home design divisions in the back of the store that operates my interior design business, Nacogdoches Home Design that I started in 2020. We are now a full service interior design business that



does remodels, new builds and interiors for residential and commercial projects.

Thanks for my wonderful employees, parents and husband who encouraged me along the way and, the community who has continued to support my businesses. I feel very blessed to be able to "do what I love everyday"... helping people style all aspects of their life, from their home to their wardrobe."

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Probably my interior design business. We have remodeled a few local business offices in the community and a few beautiful homes in the last two years and it means so much that people trusted us and were so happy with the end result.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life"

What are your hobbies?

Spending time with my husband, Kyle, two daughters, Blakely and Brooklyn, and three cats at our home in the country. Traveling, crafting and party planning

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Honestly, holidays are just so magical with kids. I love decorating our house for each holiday and watching my girls enjoy it and get excited about all the little things. Easter egg hunts, pumpkin painting, cookie decorating - all the fun things you can do with kids during the holidays makes me so happy

Christa Coulter, 31

Operations Manager, Holistic Planning

Education: Bachelor of Science from SFASU

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I enjoy working with numbers and helping people to succeed financially.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

President of Fredonia Rotary, Board Member of CASA of Deep East Texas

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Finding forever homes for children in foster care by hosting Forever Family Fun Day with Fredonia Rotary.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Graduating from multiple leadership programs

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Raising my two boys- Wyatt (5) and Whitten (3)

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

What are your hobbies?

Volunteering, traveling and shopping



What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Polar Express train ride at Christmas with my kids

Congratulations

Henry Dekoeyer

on being honored as a

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and being a

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DIRECTOR
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Derek Theiss
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NACOGDOCHES HIGH SCHOOL

NACOGDOCHES
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Jasmine Hassan, 26
Executive Director, Christian Women's Job Corps Nacogdoches



Education: Bachelor's of Science in Psychology and Medical Humanities
What path led you to your chosen profession?
 Personal life experience, a need for advocates in the community, and addressing the theology of poverty.
What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?
 Board Member for Greater East Texas Community Action Program, Leadership Nacogdoches class of 2024-2025
What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?
 Being able to be a part of a board of directors who directly govern an organization that addresses poverty directly with the communities they serve is an ultimate blessing.
What career achievement are you most proud of?
 Becoming an Executive Director has been the highlight of my career so far. As a young professional, it can be intimidating to step into a role like this, but every day has shown me how rewarding and impactful our agency is in the community- such a great way to pay it forward to all those who helped me get here.
What personal achievement are you most proud of?
 Overcoming homelessness, becoming the first person in my family to graduate from college, and taking care of my younger siblings. I took all three of them in my senior year of college at SFA. Today, one of them is in her first year of nursing school at the medical center in Houston, one is at his first year of college in Huntsville, and my youngest is a sophomore at the high school. Seeing them be successful and live a better life than I did is what makes me feel really proud. Doing this completely on my own has been a journey, but the support of the Nacogdoches community has gotten me this far.
What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 "Remember your why". We all have hard days, and remembering my "why" is the sole reason that I keep pushing forward. The

fire that burns within you of what you're passionate about- pay attention to that. Put 100 percent in. Integrate that in everything that you do, and everything will fall into place.
What are your hobbies?
 I love to make collages for people I love. I enjoy going out to eat with friends, talking for hours and pretending to be a food critic.
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 In the first few years of taking my siblings in, one of my coworkers from a job I used to work created a Gofundme and surprised my family and I with an all-paid trip to Austin. Every year since then, my siblings and I have gone to Austin to celebrate Christmas together.
Any other information you would like to include?
 The people of Nacogdoches have truly shown what a real community is: a helping hand, a listening ear and so much love. There is a charm to this town – it's true, and I'm so glad I am here.

Caleb Jones, 16
Nursery Owner, Gen1 Greenhouse



Education: Homeschool, Senior
What path led you to your chosen profession?
 A horticultural hobby that started when my neighbor gifted me a succulent turned into a business.
What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?
 Sharing the appreciation of plants to all generations through volunteer work and free events and classes.
What career achievement are you most proud of?
 Being acknowledged by the Texas Nursery and Landscape Association and being invited to attend the 2023 TNLA Hort Forum.
What personal achievement are you most proud of?
 My salvation and walk with God.
What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." - 1 Corinthians 10:31 KJV
What are your hobbies?
 Horticulture, piano, and agriculture.
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 Thanksgiving with my family.
Any other information you would like to include?

I am a 16-year-old Christian homeschool student with a passion for plants. My mission is to share the love and appreciation of nature with all generations, and I am doing that through my business, Gen1 Greenhouse. In fact, the name "Gen1" comes from Genesis 1, which records the creation of nature.

Sean Hightower, 36
Managing Partner, Hightower, Franklin, and James PLLC



Education: SFASU and Texas A&M School of Law
What path led you to your chosen profession?
 I knew from a very young age that I wanted to be a lawyer. My parents will tell you that I was excellent at arguing and stirring up my brothers and sister. When I came to Nacogdoches in undergrad I went through the phonebook and called every lawyer in the book until I spoke to Tim James. Tim offered me a job as an assistant paying me just enough to afford the parties on the weekend, and I loved every minute. Tim was a great mentor and law partner and really taught me how to practice law.
What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?
 Former Precinct 2 Director Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital District, Board of Directors for the Texas Criminal Defense Lawyers Association, Treasurer for the Nacogdoches County Democrats, Chair of the Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital Foundation.
What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?
 The continuing support of Nacogdoches Memorial Hospital. Rural health care across the country is struggling, and unfortunately, we see that in our own community. We as a community must do everything we can to support Memorial Hospital.
What career achievement are you most proud of?
 I'm proud of the growing success at my law firm. We have been honored to represent thousands of East Texans throughout my time in Nacogdoches. I enjoy the challenges of the work and being asked to be there to fight for an individual during some of their most difficult times. I've had the pleasure of traveling the country and speaking at conferences to other lawyers. It's been a highly rewarding practice thus far.
What personal achievement are you most proud of?

I'm proud of the life I've built here in Nacogdoches and the community I surround myself with. I enjoy going to eat and knowing most of the people around me. I like knowing if I have a problem I usually know exactly who to call to fix it.
What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 Everyone wants the honey, but no one wants to get sticky.
What are your hobbies?
 Traveling, hole in the wall Mexican food
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 SFA Homecoming. I enjoy having all my old friends and their families having a reason to come back to Nac to visit.

Olivia Kiritsy, 41
Broker/Owner, Loblolly Properties, LLC



Education: Nacogdoches High School class of 2000; BBA Finance and Political Science, SFASU '06; Masters Public Administration, SFASU '11
What path led you to your chosen profession?
 I was introduced to a career in the real estate industry while in high school.
What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?
 National Association of REALTORS®, Texas REALTORS®, Region 9 Political Involvement Committee; Nacogdoches County Board of REALTORS®, Treasurer; Lufkin Association of REALTORS®; Greater Tyler Area Association of REALTORS®; Nacogdoches Economic Development Corporation; Christ Episcopal School Board; Nacogdoches County Chamber of Commerce, Chair Elect
What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?
 All of my volunteer and civic achievements are equally important however some of my favorites include 10 years of active service with Nacogdoches Junior Forum of which eight years were spent on the Junior Forums, Inc. State of Texas board and two of those years as State President as well as my graduation from Leadership Nacogdoches and my graduation and acknowledgment as a CPM or Texas Certified Public Manager. Volunteering to my profession - I have served as the Nacogdoches County Board of REALTORS® President for four terms (maybe more) and served as our TREPAC Trustee for four years.
What career achievement are you most proud of?
 I was and am still most proud of my career achievement on June 4, 2018, when I started Loblolly Properties, LLC.
What personal achievement are you most proud of?
 I am most proud of earning my broker's license and starting a company that provides competitive and above average salary

and compensation to my Broker Associate REALTORS®, Associate REALTORS®, and employees.
What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 Wake up a better version of yourself, every day.
What are your hobbies?
 Traveling, visiting pop up museums, visiting new restaurants, watching movies at a theater, going to concerts and learning about the world
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 Loblolly Properties' annual team building trip and annual goal planning event.
Any other information you would like to include?
 I just love life.

CONGRATULATIONS SEAN HIGHTOWER



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Brigette Kozash, 28

Stained Glass Artist, Fire House Nac Co-Founder

Education: BA - History at SFASU

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I co-founded Fire House Nac Art Collective as a way to create an inclusive, safe space for the Nacogdoches community to enjoy music and art together. To me, having a community art space builds camaraderie and a sense of belonging. Both of these things are essential for a sustainable Nacogdoches. Stained glass art as a medium has been a valuable process of teaching myself patience, while also stoking my desires to be creative and finding a sense of purpose. I create art that lasts generations and that folks can treasure. I find fulfillment in the way that this medium is beautiful and dynamic.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

I am a co-founder of Fire House Nac Art Collective, as well as their social media coordinator.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

I believe that my co-organizing in multiple music and art events, such as the Nacogdoches Summer Squash, Nac Noise (annually), and assisting in multiple art related events are incredibly important to me.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

I love being able to know my art is in so many places, like the Fredonia Brewery, almost all 50 states and also in two European countries.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Finding self-confidence and acceptance, truly loving myself for



who I am, and becoming a person of integrity.
What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 Community over competition.
What are your hobbies?
 Writing zines/social commentary, cooking, outdoor recreation and waterfall hunting.
Any other information you would like to include?
 Remember the importance of radical self-love for yourself and your community. Also, thank you to my amazing husband, Ethan, and my best friends for loving me so much even when I couldn't.

Brett Payne, 31

Account Executive, NacSpace

Education: BBA, Marketing from SFASU

What path led you to your chosen profession?

After serving in the United States Marine Corps, I enrolled at SFA. Following graduation I left Nacogdoches, but always knew that life would bring me back. I established a career in sales and marketing and when an opportunity became available at NacSpace, I took it. Happy to be back in Nacogdoches, serving the community in the technology industry, as part of the 24-25 Leadership Nacogdoches Class, a Nacogdoches Jaycee, and an action committee member of the Nacogdoches Hero Foundation.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Nacogdoches Jaycees, Nacogdoches Hero Foundation, 24-25 Leadership Nacogdoches Class

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Not completed yet, but one of the Leadership Nacogdoches Class projects is going to be to assist the Nacogdoches Farmers Market with both structural renovations, as well as revamping the electrical infrastructure to ensure that it continues to last for generations.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Reputation is everything. I am proud to have built a reputation in the community to have clear and transparent communication, integrity, and a servants heart.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

The ultimate achievement is to have served the United States, as a Tiltrotor Crew Chief on the MV-22 Ospreys as a United States Marine.



What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 Be better today, than you were yesterday.
What are your hobbies?
 I love live music, golf, archery, hunting, hiking and spending time with the family.
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 No matter what meal it is, any time my family sits down at a table to eat, there is a prayer before eating. Faith first, always.
Any other information you would like to include?
 I am incredibly honored for the nomination and look forward to continued service to the community.

Weelynd McMullan, 30

Exhibition Coordinator, Stephen F. Austin State University

Education: Master of Arts

What path led you to your chosen profession?

While attending SFASU, I had an assignment in my professional practices in which we as a class worked to organize and install an art exhibition in the Cole Art Center. I fell in love with gallery work and immediately applied for a job, and ever since I have been in gallery and fine arts work. When the Exhibition Coordinator for the SFASU Art Galleries position opened up, I applied and was fortunate enough to be selected, and now I'm working my dream job.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Stephen F. Austin State University School of Art.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Working as an artist for the Friends of the Visual Arts 12x12 Fundraiser in order to help raise money for SFASU School of Art student scholarships.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Installing the exhibition "You Won't See it Coming" by artist Sarah Fisher. The show received the number one position in Glasstire's Top Five: August 18, 2022.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

All of the unique art and historic objects I've been able to work with and organize exhibitions of. My younger self could not have imagined the amazing works I have been able to experience.



What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 Measure twice, cut once.
What are your hobbies?
 Cooking and video games are hard to beat.
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 All of the different festive foods I make with family and friends.

Morgan Pulliam, 30

Full-Time Doctoral Student SFASU

Education: Bachelor of Science in Psychology (SFASU); Master of Education in Higher Education and Student Affairs (University of Arkansas); All but dissertation – Educational Doctorate in Educational Leadership with Higher Education emphasis (SFASU)

What path led you to your chosen profession?

Getting involved as an undergraduate student led to my chosen profession. I had amazing mentors such as Dr. Hollie Smith and Dr. Adam Peck, who believed in me, and made me realize how important higher education and student affairs is. Working in student affairs is the best thing to happen to me. Students are my "why" and why I continue to do what I do and work hard.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Alpha Sigma Alpha Sorority, Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors, Association of Fraternal Leadership Values, National Panhellenic Conference

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Giving my time to any and all volunteer opportunities is the most important to me. Anyone can donate money, but giving their time is a better way to support different avenues.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

The career achievement I am most proud of is receiving the Salsbury-Scott Interfraternity Award from Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

The personal achievement I am most proud of is proposing my dissertation on November 18, and potentially graduating in May 2025 with my Doctor of Education degree. As a first-generation student, I never imagined that I would be here, almost completing college and having a doctorate.



What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?
 "If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are an excellent leader." – Dolly Parton
What are your hobbies?
 Reading, hanging out with my cats, and watching true crime
What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?
 My favorite tradition is one I share with many other students at SFA – the Big Dip. When I look at my ring, I am reminded of all the Lumberjacks before me and all the Lumberjacks after me, and remind myself that we are all connected, and that being a Lumberjack is a true honor.

Words of Inspiration from the Shining Stars

"Success is not final, failure is not fatal: It is the courage to continue that counts." — Winston Churchill

Isaiah 42:4- "He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails."

"Carry out a random act of kindness, with no expectation of reward, safe in the knowledge that one day someone might do the same for you." — Princess Diana

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

"But how could you live and have no story to tell" — Fyodor Dostoevsky

"Do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life"

"Remember your why". We all have hard days, and remembering my "why" is the sole reason that I keep pushing forward. The fire that burns within you of what you're passionate about- pay attention to that. Put 100% in. Integrate that in everything that you do, and everything will fall into place.

Everyone wants the honey, but no one wants to get sticky.

"Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God." — 1 Corinthians 10:31 KJV

Wake up a better version of yourself, everyday.

Community over competition

Measure twice, cut once.

Be better today, than you were yesterday.

"If your actions create a legacy that inspires others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, then you are an excellent leader." — Dolly Parton

"Don't let your dreams be dreams." — Shia LaBeouf

"You don't become a great leader in a moment, month, or year, but rather one day at a time" — The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do by Ken Blanchard

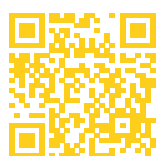
"Learn as if you will live forever, live like you will die tomorrow." — Mahatma Gandhi

A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.

Nominate a 2025 Shining Star

Know of a young leader in Nacogdoches County that should be recognized in 2025?

Nominate him or her using this form:
<https://forms.gle/c1VcPhuyh5yWkcWF6>



Nomination eligibility requirements:

- Must reside or work in Nacogdoches County
- Must have professional achievements and demonstrate service and commitment to the community.

Derek Theiss, 35

Algebra I Teacher/Water Polo Head Coach/Assistant Swim Coach, Nacogdoches ISD

Education: Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology from Stephen F. Austin State University

What path led you to your chosen profession?

Nacogdoches ISD was interested in starting a water polo team, and Coach Carrie Scroggins suggested that I join the staff.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Ambush Swimming Booster Club: Secretary

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Involvement within the local swim community and Nacogdoches community proper.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

2024 Men's Water Polo Team being District Champions

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Being engaged to Ms. Heather Stidham.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"Don't let your dreams be dreams." - Shia LaBeouf

What are your hobbies?

Watching movies and watching the step-kids' swim meets and soccer games.



What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Being a part of the long standing tradition of a very successful athletics program with both swim and water polo at Nacogdoches High School.

Mireya Vazquez, 35

Assistant Vice President, Cadence Bank

Education: Bachelor of Business Administration

What path led you to your chosen profession?

During my last semester at SFA I started working as a teller with BancorpSouth Bank, now known as Cadence Bank. I enjoyed pushing myself to learn more and was intrigued how financing worked and soon learned what all was involved in banking. I loved how fulfilling it was to be able to contribute to the community and be able to provide financial assistance and help people achieve their goals.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Serving as Director for the Fredonia Rotary Board and serving on the executive board for Salvation Army.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Volunteering with Rotary at the Forever Family Fun Day by serving a special part of the community, which are the kids.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Being able to assist customers since the very beginning of their financial goals by educating them and eventually seeing them achieve their goals.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Having a leadership role at my workplace.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?



"Learn as if you will live forever, live like you will die tomorrow." - Mahatma Gandhi

What are your hobbies?

Working out and reading

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Celebrating my kid's birthdays every year with their favorite breakfast and singing Happy Birthday.

Denise Thompson, 43

Account Leader, Etech

Education: High school diploma - Woden High School

What path led you to your chosen profession?

After deciding to change careers in 2016, I joined Etech as a customer service representative. Within the first month, I became enamored with the company's values and mission of servant leadership, which aligned seamlessly with my own principles. This was confirmation that Etech was where I needed to establish my professional career.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Nacogdoches Junior Forum, Leadership Nacogdoches, Boys & Girls Club, United Way, Christian Women's Job Corp.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

It's so hard to choose just one. With Junior Forum, we get to volunteer with numerous organizations so we can make a difference all around Nac, however CWJC holds a special place in my heart because of the values of the organization and the difference you can make in these ladies lives.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Being a mentor in our yearly Serve Mentorship program for the past three years would be what I am most proud of in my career. This gives me the opportunity to work on my own personal development while pouring into other leaders at the same time.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

My faith and family mean the world to me.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

"You don't become a great leader in a moment, month, or year, but rather one day at a time" -The Secret: What Great Leaders



Know and Do by Ken Blanchard

What are your hobbies?

Shopping, hiking, traveling, reading, watching sports and spending time with my friends and family.

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

We have an entire Thanksgiving weekend tradition- all of our kids, cousins, friends, and extended family comes to my mom's house for Thanksgiving lunch, then later that evening we do a fire outside and roast marshmallows and hot dogs. The kids (adult and littles) and Papa play hide and go seek in the dark all weekend. It has been so fun to see our kids and their friends get so excited about the weekend over the years.

Charles "Z" Zemanek, III, 29

Director of Human Resources, Nacogdoches ISD

Education: Bachelor of Art - SFASU, Master of Education - Texas A&M: College Station.

What path led you to your chosen profession?

I always thought I would be a lawyer, but I found my real passion is making a difference in our future one kid at a time. My purpose in life is to help create the conditions so that others can thrive and there no better place to do that than in the public schools.

What trade, professional and civic organizations do you belong to, and what offices do you hold?

Nacogdoches Rotary; planning and zoning commission.

What volunteer or civic achievement is most important to you?

Helping keep Nacogdoches beautiful and a great place to raise a family.

What career achievement are you most proud of?

Being named a principal at 26 and having the opportunity to lead an award winning campus.

What personal achievement are you most proud of?

Hopefully obtaining my doctorate from Texas A&M this August.

What is a quote or motto that you live by in your professional or personal life?

A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.

What are your hobbies?



Gardening, reading and role playing games, either table top or electronic

What is your favorite tradition whether it be family, holiday, personal?

Growing up, I enjoyed going to Cracker Barrel on Thanksgiving.

Any other information you would like to include?

I love my community and hope to leave it better than I found it.

Thank you to our sponsors:



CONGRATULATIONS LEIGH ANNE CARVER

We are so thankful to have your leadership and joy at Nacogdoches Medical Center. You make us a Community Built on Care!

