



Contra Costa Council on Homelessness

Homelessness Awareness Month 2021 Awards for “Thriving in the Face of Homelessness”

The “Thriving in the Face of Homelessness” award is to recognize individuals who have experienced the crisis of homelessness and a) supported other people experiencing homelessness and/or b) moved out of homelessness themselves.

Awardees

1. A. D. (initials used to protect privacy) (District 1)
2. Carmella Kowall (District 2)
3. Charlie, Leslie, Tommy, Scott, Jon, Pam, and Kevin from Trinity Center (District 4)
4. Colin Jack Fliehmman (District 4)
5. D. G. (initials used to protect privacy) (District 1)
6. David Cohen (District 1)
7. Denise Mills (District 1)
8. Ileia Thomas (District 4)
9. J. G. (initials used to protect privacy) (District 1)
10. James Martin (District unknown)
11. Jo Bruno (District 5)
12. Kai Powell (District 1)
13. Loren Dalbert (District unknown)
14. M. C. (initials used to protect privacy) (District 1)
15. Patrick Davis (District unknown)
16. Quinton Walker ((District 4)
17. Raymond and Dolores Custodio (District 2)
18. Yesenia Pleitz (District 1)

The following pages contain descriptions of each awardee as provided by the person (s) who nominated them.

A. D.

Nominated by: Larry Wilson

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: This is one of those stories that has to be told. My client, a mother of two, is employed as an IHSS making minimum wage. She has a history of homelessness going back several years. She was able to secure an apartment for her family in 2019. Hope Solutions assisted with her move-in costs. A. was thankful for her new residence but she hoped for a safer area to raise her two little ones. In 2020, she was able to move to a really nice apartment complex.

Her children are doing really well in school since they have become more stable. She's taking on more clients with her IHSS work and reunited with her husband, which is a plus. Speaking with her recently, she expressed such thankfulness for all the support and resources she received to better the life her family now has.

Carmella Kowall

Nominated by: Ann Lawrence

Supervisory District: District 2 (San Ramon, Danville, Alamo, Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda, Canyon, Rossmoor, Parkmead, Saranap and a portion of Walnut Creek))

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Carmella Kowall and her children, G. and J. Kowall were clients at Winter Nights in 2014/2015, from October through May. Carmella describes a divorce and absent father leading to serious financial stress. She worked full time but the bills still piled up and rent became impossible. They were ultimately evicted. With an eviction and unpaid rent on her record, no one would rent to her. For 2 ½ years she continued to work full time, parent her kids, while living in various motels that could cost her over \$3,000 per month. In 2014, at a motel, Carmella met a father and his 2 young sons who were also homeless. He was interviewing with Winter Nights and left to join the program. After arriving, he called Carmella, leaving messages saying *"You have to come here. This is just what you need"*. She says it took her a few more days to finally agree to talk to Bill. It changed her life and the lives of her children.

At the time J. was in 7th grade, G. was a sophomore in high school and Carmella was employed full time at Kinder's.

"I never saw it as a free ride. I thought of it as holding me up so that I could take care of my business. A stepping stone. It gave me time to do the things I needed to do to make our lives better. I still worked full time, and the money I saved on motel bills and food let me pay-off my bills, including all the back-rent. The kids focused on school. I focused on working and finding us a home. We were ready to start again." - Carmella

Since leaving Winter Nights in the spring of 2015 a lot has happened. A rental wasn't immediately available because of the eviction on her record, so it was back to a motel for a bit.

The owner of the motel got to know Carmella and the kids, and was really impressed with them and their story. When an apartment became available in a building he owned, he offered to rent to them regardless of the past eviction. They have been there ever since.

Carmella moved on from her long-time job at Kinder's in 2017 and joined Toyota Walnut Creek, where she was promoted to Concierge Manager in 2019 (the free pickup and delivery service for customers). She is working to grow the service in a time of COVID contact-free protocols. She now manages 400 customer trips a month. J.J. graduated from high school in 2020 and is employed full time at a local electrical supply company. Gloria graduated from high school in June 2017, and went on to California State University, Monterey Bay. She received multiple scholarships her senior year and also received one through CSUMB. In May 2021 she graduated Cum Laude with her B.S. in Biology, with a concentration in Evolution, Ecology and Organismal Biology in Science. For something entirely different, and 2700 miles away, Gloria enlisted in the US Army. She has completed Basic Training and is now at Fort Eustis, Virginia training to repair the CH-47 Chinook helicopter.

In July 2020, when Winter Nights Family Shelter, Inc became an independent nonprofit, we began forming a Board of Directors. High on our list of candidates were Winter Nights alumni; individuals who knew the program from the inside and could speak for the clients. Carmella was among almost 20 men and women with various skills who were nominated. In December 2020 she was officially elected to the board of Winter Nights, along with five other community members. Her voice is sought and heard in all aspects of board responsibilities.

Thank you, Carmella, for giving your time and talent in support of the future of Winter Nights.

When I asked Carmella if I could nominate her she said (emailed)

"Can I just say wow!! I am so honored that you would like to nominate me!! I am so floored and humbled. Thank you! Love my Winter Night's family!! Homelessness is not the end of the world, it's the beginning of a new one. It's your choice what you do with it."

Charlie, Leslie, Tommy, Scott, Jon, Pam, and Kevin From Trinity Center

Nominated by: Leslie Gleason

Supervisory District: District 4 (Clayton, Concord, Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek, and the unincorporated Contra Costa Centre)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and

courage: When a dedicated leader joins forces with people experiencing homelessness and community supporters, what do you get? Trinity Center, a place of safety where “everybody knows your name” and works together to make sure people living unhoused can access basic resources, build community, and move forward. We proudly nominate our seven (7) staff who have lived experience of homelessness and/or substance use disorders and who bring their talents and teamwork daily in service of others. Because of them, and others who have been part of our history, Trinity Center can keep the doors to opportunity open for others facing or at risk of homelessness. Not only do they keep the Center operating, and support members who are facing the daily challenges they have shared, they serve as role models for persons seeking housing, financial stability, and recovery.

Individually and collectively, their accomplishments have been remarkable—overcoming substance use disorders, pursuing education, raising families, regaining housing, maintaining employment—demonstrating strength, courage, resilience and hopefulness that quietly says “you can do it too!” For believing in themselves, each other, and coming together to create a community that truly cares about persons living unhoused, we recognize and commend Charlie, Leslie, Tommy, Scott, Jon, Pam, and Kevin for “Thriving in the Face of Homelessness!”

Colin Jack Fliehmann

Nominated by: Wayne Calhoon

Supervisory District: District 4 (Clayton, Concord, Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek, and the unincorporated Contra Costa Centre)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Jack has provided 30,000-50,000 room service style hot meals and supplies, plus his love, delivered every single day on his route in Concord. His work is mostly self funded.

Colin Jack Fliehmann

Nominated by: Michele Perry

Supervisory District: District 4 (Clayton, Concord, Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek, and the unincorporated Contra Costa Centre)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and

courage: Jack gets up before 4 am, 7 days a week to carry food, supplies, and hope to unhoused people in Concord. He is out there in the dark, whether anyone comes with him or not. Also, he has chartered a bus to take unhoused people to the beach for a day so they can feel some kind of normalcy in their lives. Jack is dedicated to caring and has rallied the community to support him. He does need more support, but what he does truly makes a difference. #LoveRevolution #LovedKnownAndNotAlone.

D. G.

Nominated by: Count Butler

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: The consumer was homeless for 2 years. He has a significant other that is expecting her first child and he was able to establish stable housing for his family.

David Cohen

Nominated by: Paula Bonnell

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Completed his teaching credentials!

Denise Mills

Nominated by: Denise Mills

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Denise made the Dean's list for 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, is on the Juvenile Justice Coordinating Council for Contra Costa County, TRADEMARK WOMEN OF DISTINCTION HONORS EDITION 2020, completed AA Degrees in Dual Diagnosis Specialization & Screening, HHS, Sociology, Substance Abuse Case Management AB109 Mentor, Life Impact (self leadership & personal growth). Through this journey, this lady found much support with counselors, co-workers, professors, and family members.

Ileia Thomas

Nominated by: Ileia Thomas

Supervisory District: District 4 (Clayton, Concord, Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek, and the unincorporated Contra Costa Centre)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Experienced homelessness as single mom and now living in 1-bdrm apartment with daughter.

I am nominating myself. I started experiencing homelessness when I was pregnant for the first time with my daughter, about 5 years ago. I was pregnant and sleeping in my car, friend's couches, and eventually over 3 shelters. Fast-forward to now: the past 2 years I've gotten off welfare and food stamps. And, for 4 months now, my daughter and I live in a 1-bedroom apartment and I am working full-time at the same job for 3 years now.

J. G.

Nominated by: Michelle Milam

Supervisorial District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: J.G., is nothing if not a true representative of the American Dream. The American Dream which for many is very difficult to achieve. I met J. when he was a young person on a "Shop With A Cop" excursion. J. was always friendly, hard working and willing to learn and help others. That impressed me, to have that level of maturity at such a young age. J., at the young age of 17, found himself without housing options. He was working as a volunteer at Richmond PAL, and later was employed there.

Eventually with the help and support of the community he was able to find a safe place to stay at a transitional facility for teens, and later at a young adult facility which helped get J. into his own apartment. J., through all of this, vowed to finish school and make everyone proud of him. He graduated from high school in Richmond, and later enrolled in some of the programs offered to him at the transitional program. J. took an interest in culinary training, and decided last year to venture out on his own and start his own small business selling some of his culinary cultural dishes. He'd often take public transportation to deliver them. This was only ONE business. In addition he began painting houses, and doing home repairs and designing T-shirts for sale. It is very rare to see adults with that kind of drive. Though J. still has many challenges that he faces, I cannot think of someone who deserves this more, or has more heart to overcome them.

My life challenges, by J.

"I was in a homeless shelter in Oakland CA. For a long time I lived with my parents which were not easy. There was a lot was going on which I did not understand at all until I got older. In 2003 my mother

and father divorced each other which impacted my brother and I and our childhood. It hard for me express the pain.

But as I am getting older I am starting to understand a lot of things about life. I have learned to take challenges and do something better in life. I learned that I have to keep my head up no matter what the situation is so it can make me stronger in an lot of areas. Negative energy can turn into something positive. I'm very good at seeing the positive in every bad thing. I won't let anything stop me from reaching my goals in life including my past.

Going to college is a major step for me. Some people will not take that step in life to move on to something different in life. I am a very outgoing young man and have a heart for people and I am also an entrepreneur and I'm very good at making businesses. That is my specialty and hobby. At the age of 16, I ran my own car wash in the summer and people had people working for me. I did it again at age 17.

I am very good with managing people and running a business. I am also starting up a clothing line of my own. I plan on launching the clothing line, and adding a painting business to my list of projects. I want the best for my future I feel like college will do that for me. My goals are to own a lot of businesses and have my own company and build it under my family name. People deal with a lot in their life and cannot follow through with their goals because they deal with a lot of madness, destruction, and trauma.

From 1st grade to 5th grade I was in a behavioral private school. I did not have the best education at a young age but that does not stop me from trying to learn and understand but my childhood was rough. But I learn no matter what you are going through do not let nothing stop you from reaching your goal at all.

I achieve my goals by doing the unexpected. I will use my education to give the community hope and understanding so they know they can do anything they put their mind to. All a person needs to do is be themselves and do not let people talk them down from doing anything they want to do with their life.

At the end of the day I hold my head high no matter my situation. I've been in the street, sleeping in cars, park benches, and football fields but through all of that I don't let anything stop me. I keep going and I take the pain and make myself stronger. What is making me pursue my education is I want to show people that dreams can come true.

I want to go to an HBCU and learn more about my culture and where my people come from, and/or attend barbering college. People look up to me and I have a lot of people want to see me succeed. I feel like it will be a good experience for me and see something different. I am about to rise to the top and make my plans happen and set things in motion. I plan to teach other people how to do the same as me, including young people.

Right now I am helping this young man that is thirteen start up his own clothing line. I love helping people and bringing them together. So that way these students of mine that I help can help others from what they learned being around me. The main point of going to college is to learn and to come back and teach my community and be a good role model to everybody. I really care about giving back to my community so they can be educated and have a mindset like I have to do better and like and make something of themselves.

People often doubt themselves about how they are not going to make it because the environment in Richmond. I would like to show them that anything is possible and I want to show people that they do not have to make their self a statistic in Richmond I want them to be better than that.”

James Martin

Nominated by: Mary Fitzgerald

Supervisorial District: Unknown

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Participant was chronically homeless; in his car for a long time and hesitant to reach out for help bc he didnt feel worthy. Found him at Trinity; enrolled in SSVF. Placed him in an Emergency hotel to help protect him from COVID (he is a senior). From hotel, got VASH voucher and is stably housed. New lease on life.

Jo Bruno

Nominated by: Hans Nijessen

Supervisory District: District 5 (Hercules, Martinez, Pittsburg, portions of Pinole and Antioch, and unincorporated communities of Alhambra Valley, Bay Point, Briones, Rodeo, Pacheco, Crockett, Tormey, Port Costa, Mt. View, Vine Hill, Reliez Valley, and Clyde)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Jo Bruno, (Delta Peers) has handled herself exemplary during her own homeless ordeal and mental struggle. She is a remarkable helpful peer and a resourceful person. By her structural and determined approach and implementation of the Delta Peers organization in Antioch and Contra Costa County, she is being the role model and helpful peer, by maintaining strength and agility, as she is slugging away on the path to recognition for this group of human beings. She is, in my humble opinion the personification of the "Thriving In The Face Of Homelessness" Award and therefore, I do nominate her.

Jo Bruno

Nominated by: Samantha Handley

Supervisory District: District 5 (Hercules, Martinez, Pittsburg, portions of Pinole and Antioch, and unincorporated communities of Alhambra Valley, Bay Point, Briones, Rodeo, Pacheco, Crockett, Tormey, Port Costa, Mt. View, Vine Hill, Reliez Valley, and Clyde)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Even while unhoused, Jo continued to show up for the community. She has the Consumer seat on the Council for Homelessness. She has attended the SPIRIT program through Contra Costa Behavioral Health, and during her internship created a new community engagement model between two county offices, and is currently applying to UC Berkeley for her Master's in Public Policy, all while barely staying housed herself. Jo is a good friend. She is always there to listen without judgement and offer encouragement. She wants to see her people succeed in life. She puts her all into everything she does without a thought for what the cost might be to herself.

Jo Bruno

Nominated by: Jessica Rojas

Supervisory District: District 5 (Hercules, Martinez, Pittsburg, portions of Pinole and Antioch, and unincorporated communities of Alhambra Valley, Bay Point, Briones, Rodeo, Pacheco, Crockett, Tormey, Port Costa, Mt. View, Vine Hill, Reliez Valley, and Clyde)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Jo Bruno was recently the the valedictorian at her graduation from Spirit, she is the founder of Delta Peers, she is helping to establish the Peer Network of Contra Costa County (PNCC), she is a peer advisor, she is a writer, massage therapist, an advocate, a beautiful soul and so much more. I am grateful to have met Jo in elementary and years later we meet through her work in Contra Costa and I am so grateful and impressed by who she is and strives to be and all that she holds and continues to push through and be a voice for others in need. She has always had a fighting spirit and a love for others - her voice is so needed for change! Her resilience shouldn't have been needed - she should have been protected from all that she has endured and yet she is thriving and not only that but living with purpose!

One of my favorite posts from her social media was one that stated, "Reminder: If serving is beneath you, leading is beyond you." And that is a beautiful example of who she is.

Kai Powell

Nominated by: Darlene Scruggs

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Kai Powell goes above and beyond the call of duty for the clients of Project Room Key. She has helped a family get to into permanent housing with their two set of twins, she works tirelessly to get the kids at the Marriott into school and bridge the gap between families in transition and the schools in West County. Kai imbues the clients with hope, and self belief. The clients say she sees them and for once they feel someone really cares.

The one thing that makes her so courageous is that she came through her lived experience to be a beacon of light to many that are lost and with out hope. Kai shares her experience, strength, and hope to encourage everyone that she come in contact with.

Loren Dalbert

Nominated by: Loren Dalbert

Supervisory District: They serve the entire county

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Loren shines in so many ways:

1. His ability to apply himself and learn about something new (such as the technology tools we use – Trello and Miro).
2. His ability to adapt to an entirely new environment (public service, virtual work).
3. Working with a new (cross-functional) team and learning about the members of the team (workforce services and homeless services, plus the two coaches and white paper writer who served as meeting support early on).
4. His enthusiastic dedication to the WAF/HCD project (Workforce Accelerator Fund/Human-Centered Design) and all the research it entails.

But mostly, his courage is the most prominent way he shines because it allows him to do all the rest. Loren has been through a lot in his life, but he dares to keep swimming forward into the unknown, even when things are scary, and he is facing something he has never done before, and he is not sure he can do it. His open-mindedness is the thing that makes him change his own “Why?” into a “Why not?” Whether he realizes it or not, he has inspired us all with his leadership on the project and his mastery over himself. Those comments were from my annual performance review.

M. C.

Nominated by: Count Butler

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: The consumer is legally blind and was homeless for a couple of years. He is highly motivated to become an entrepreneur.

Patrick Davis

Nominated by: Rylie Silva

Supervisorial District: They serve the entire county

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: Patrick is courageously helping men overcome the challenge of homelessness by leading people through the very process of restoration that he himself walked through. Patrick's life is one of many ups and downs but he made courageous decisions to not only overcome for himself, but now for others.

Quinton Walker

Nominated by: Mary Fitzgerald

Supervisory District: District 4 (Clayton, Concord, Pleasant Hill, part of Walnut Creek, and the unincorporated Contra Costa Centre)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: After spending 38 years incarcerated, this participant completely changed his life around. While inside; he recieved 3 AA's degrees (BA's not offered). When he came out, he found our SSVF program. We were able to help him get on his feet and find housing. He now is a counselor for others and stable.

Raymond and Dolores Custodio

Nominated by: Mary Fitzgerald

Supervisorial District: District 2 (San Ramon, Danville, Alamo, Lafayette, Moraga, Orinda, Canyon, Rossmoor, Parkmead, Saranap and a portion of Walnut Creek))

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: A chronically homeless senior couple that lived in their car for many years. They got very bogged down by debt but couldn't get on their feet. Found our program, got housing, and are working to get out of debt. They got a HUD VASH housing voucher, are stable now and much healthier and happier after getting off of the streets.

Yesenia Pleitez

Nominated by: Hillary Bowers

Supervisory District: District 1 (Richmond, San Pablo, El Cerrito, part of Pinole, and the unincorporated communities of Bayview, East Richmond Heights, El Sobrante, Kensington, Montalvin Manor, Tara Hills, North Richmond, and Rollingwood)

Description of nominee's personal accomplishments that reflect resilience and courage: I would like to Nominate Yesenia Pleitez. She is a former CORE client and now work for CORE full time as a Lead Outreach Worker. Yesenia is Spanish speaking and uses here experiences with homelessness to help others. She is an asset to CORE and the homeless Community. Yesenia is a trauma and suicide survivor.

She has shared her story publicly before including how she overcame mental health and substance abuse issues. Worked to get custody of her children, find independent housing, and full-time employment. She has an amazing story and is a true testament that people experiencing homelessness can recover and give back to others what was given to them.