

Baylor University names recipients of alumni awards

March 2, 2021

WACO—Baylor University will recognize six individuals as recipients of the 2021 Baylor Alumni Awards.

A virtual award recognition event on April 11 will provide the kickoff of Baylor Alumni Week, April 11-18.



Linda Livingstone

“Celebrating members of the Baylor Family who have committed their lives to excellence in their professions and service to others is an important expression of our university mission. It also is an important reminder that each day, as we pursue the work of the university to equip tomorrow’s leaders and servants, we are preparing our students to positively impact their communities and professions in profound ways,” President Linda Livingstone said.

“Baylor is honored to recognize the recipients of this year’s Baylor Alumni Awards for their outstanding contributions and achievements to Baylor and society. Celebrating the entire Baylor Family through Baylor Alumni Week is our way of expressing deep gratitude to all those who love this university

and support its mission.”

Alumni of the Year

Dr. Gary J. Sheppard, an internal medicine physician in private practice in Southwest Houston, is recipient of the Alumni of the Year award, presented to a graduate who has demonstrated remarkable achievement in the previous year.

Throughout his career, Sheppard has been a strong advocate for the health care needs of underserved populations with an emphasis on hypertension and diabetes. Facing the COVID-19 pandemic and patient fears about visiting a physician office in 2020, Sheppard worked to keep his clinic open, keep his staff employed and remain available to patients who needed their care.

Sheppard is a community volunteer, a participant in numerous professional medical organizations and a member of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church, where he is on the board of trustees, directs the handbell choir and has served on the Courtesy Corps more than 40 years.

Young Alumni of the Year

Jessica Cope, president, co-founder and resident director of The Hopeful Theatre Project in Dallas-Fort Worth is the recipient of the Young Alumni of the Year honor, recognizing a graduate age 40 or under who has demonstrated remarkable achievement in the previous year.

In 2018, she began pursuing her passion project— a nonprofit theater company that would not only give actors a place to hone their craft, but also give back to the community by dedicating 100 percent of ticket proceeds to charity. In 2019, The Hopeful Theatre Project produced three

shows that successfully raised thousands of dollars for The Ronald McDonald House Charities, Make-a-Wish Foundation and Salvation Army, among other charities.

Pro Ecclesia, Pro Texana

Daniel Roby, chief executive officer of Austin Street Center in Dallas, is the recipient of the *Pro Ecclesia* Medal of Service, awarded to individuals whose broad contributions to Christian ministry have made an immeasurable impact. Founded in 1983, Austin Street Center provides safe shelter for and meets the basic needs of the most vulnerable unhoused population. In addition to providing shelter, showers, clothing and meals, the Austin Street Center offers employment and education resources, mental health services and transportation.

As CEO, Roby has doubled the number of case managers, initiated diversion and aftercare programs and embraced the “Housing First” model of shelter management. In addition, under his leadership, Austin Street Center executed a \$15 million capital campaign to support the construction of a 60,000 square-foot, 24/7 emergency shelter and day service center slated to open in 2022.

Timothy Head executive director of the Faith & Freedom Coalition in Atlanta, Ga., is recipient of the *Pro Texana* Medal of Service, which recognizes an individual whose contributions in furthering the mission of Baylor have made a significant impact in the public or nonprofit sector. The Faith & Freedom Coalition seeks to educate, equip and mobilize people of faith and like-minded individuals to be effective citizens and to influence public policy at all levels of government.

Head was integral in the passage of landmark federal prison reform commonly known as the First Step Act, as well as the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act.

Media and the Arts

Brett James, award-winning songwriter, singer and producer, will receive the award for Contributions to the Professions in Media & Arts. After more than two decades, James has about 500 recorded songs across musical genres to his credit, and he has topped the Billboard Country chart with 26 No. 1 songs and many more top 20 singles.

In 2006, he earned his first ASCAP Country Songwriter of the Year award, along with the Grammy for Best Country Song for “Jesus Take the Wheel,” recorded by Carrie Underwood. In 2009, James achieved two of his three Music Row “Triple Play” awards for three No. 1 songs in a single chart year, and he earned ASCAP Songwriter of the Year for a second time in October 2010.

In April 2020, James released a new EP of his own, *I Am Now*, and in November, he was inducted into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame.

Alumni by Choice

The first recipient of the new Alumni by Choice of the Year award is Merrie Beckham, a member of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, where she began the first Mothers of Preschoolers group in North Texas. For more than 35 years, she has mentored young mothers in their journey. In 2000, she was honored by the national organization as Mentor of the Year.

She was named Baylor University’s first Alumni by Choice by then-Chancellor Abner McCall and President Herbert Reynolds in 1986. She and her husband Sparkey created an endowed fund to support the work of Baylor’s Institute for Oral History as it records and preserves the history of the Alumni by Choice program and its members.