

Service, achievement define Best & Brightest finalists



More than 150 of Leon County's most outstanding high school seniors were selected this week as finalists for the 2016 Best & Brightest Awards, which recognize public and private school students who excel both academically and service to school and community. The finalists from each school will next undergo an interview process culminating in the Best & Brightest Awards Ceremony, to be held May 11 at Ruby Diamond Concert Hall, at which countywide winners will be announced.

"The students that participate in this program continually demonstrate their aptitude for excellence and it pleases me to say that this year is no different," said Laura Rogers, Program Director of World Class Schools and coordinator of The Best & Brightest Awards. "Seeing the academic brilliance of this year's finalists, coupled with the care they put into the community, makes us so proud to celebrate the achievements of these students for another year."

The Best & Brightest Awards program, now in its 11th year, has recognized more than 1,344 exceptional public and private high school seniors and awarded more than \$454,000 in scholarships since its inception. The Best & Brightest Awards program is sponsored by Envision Credit Union, in partnership with Leon County Schools, World Class Schools of Leon County, The Tallahassee Democrat, Sachs Media Group, Sperry & Associates, Miller Glass Company, The Florida League of Cities, Bevis Funeral Home, Capital City Hyundai, MLD Architects, Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare, Student Housing Solutions, NAI Talcor and the Greater Tallahassee Chamber of Commerce.



Nominees have been announced for the 2016 Best & Brightest Awards. Here, top seniors from area schools are honored at last year's Best & Brightest Ceremony at Ruby Diamond Concert Hall. (Photo: Democrat files)

On March 5, panels of select community leaders interviewed the 2016 finalists on topics such as foreign language, technology and drama, to determine the winners of the countywide awards. This year, 153 finalists were evaluated on their academic achievement, leadership and community service. A winner, runner-up and honorable mention recipient will be named from each category.

“For over a decade the Best & Brightest Awards have allowed us to recognize the Leon County students who are excelling in our schools and inspiring our community through their exceptional academic and civic work,” said Ron Sachs, founder of the Best & Brightest Awards. “The outstanding work of this year’s students has already set them apart from their peers, and, once again, raises the bar thanks to the determination and dedication they have shown.”

To reach this point, all the finalists have demonstrated a solid record of academic achievement and expertise in one of 15 competitive categories in addition to school and community service. First-place winners in each category will receive scholarships of \$1,500; runners-up will be awarded \$750; and honorable mention recipients will receive \$500. All other finalists will receive a \$100 scholarship in recognition of their superlative accomplishments.

In addition to celebrating high school students, the Best & Brightest Awards program reaches out to younger Leon County students. The program conducts an Eighth Grade Essay Contest, and three students from across the county will win awards ranging from \$100 to \$500. The contest provides middle school students with much-needed positive reinforcement and helps encourage them to reflect on the importance of community involvement and academic achievement as they enter their high school careers. Schools will select the winning essays by April.

Another feature of the program, first introduced four years ago, is the Spirit of the Best & Brightest Awards, presented to the Best & Brightest winner who best exhibits a deep commitment to civic duty and service. That student will receive a \$2,500 scholarship commemorating the late Brooks Rogers, in addition to his or her Best & Brightest scholarship award winnings.

This year’s finalists for the 11th Anniversary of The Best & Brightest Awards are:

Art: Keiara Burnside (Leon), Ayanna Chukes (Godby), Kari Essary (Maclay), Katarina Forsthoefel (JP II), Dizavier Harris (FAMU DRS), Clara Molina (Lincoln), Sarah Osborn (Chiles), Akshar Patel (FSUS), Nya Peterson (Rickards), Emma Wharton (SAIL)

Athletics: Tanner Adkison (Godby), Teresa Conroy (JP II), Demi Dedman (FSUS), William Dodson (Chiles), Curtis Gaskins (Rickards), Claire Kercheval-Roig (Leon), Quinton Laudadio (Home School), Cassidy Ann Mehr (SAIL), Paige Nicholson (Lincoln), Laylah Roberts (FAMU DRS), Jessica Secreast (Maclay), Aimee Williams (NFC)

Business: Ayesha Bennett (Godby), Taylor Bickett (JP II), Lauren Delp (Chiles), Harbria Gardner (Rickards), Madison Hanna (Lincoln), Jenna Hurst (FSUS), Andrew Inman (NFC), Victoria Kistler (Home School), Camille Okonkwo (Leon), Emma Salters (Maclay)

Career: Anunoy Dussa (Chiles), Khalid Ethridge (Godby), Megan Hayes (Lincoln), Darin Meeker (Maclay), Emilie Miller (JP II), Rebecca Prater (FSUS), Christine Wahl (Leon), Ayanna Young (Rickards)

Drama & Performing Arts: Amir Blair (Rickards), Yamani Bryant-McCray (Godby), Shelbe DuBree (SAIL), Ryan Koch (Lincoln), Matthias Laywell (JP II), Elizabeth Lehman (Home School), Bethany O'Leary (NFC), Mia Pesta (Leon), Zoe Porter (FSUS), Briallen Sanchez-Thurber (Chiles)

English & Language Arts: Peter Aagaard (Home School), Kaitlyn Bludau (FSUS), Allyson Brauns (SAIL), Amelia Bunnell (Chiles), Marilyn Edmond (FAMU DRS), Mary Kathryn Healy (Maclay), Jennifer Hoeflich (Lincoln), Tsion Kiros (Rickards), Cathryn LaJeunesse (Leon), Victoria Lanter (Godby), Danielle Shine (JP II)

Foreign Language: Conrad Ager (JP II), Shani Cole (Godby), Brandon Cruz (FSUS), Nancy Engel (Leon), Hannah Kinnon (Home School), Risha Prasad (Maclay), Brittany Scanameo (Rickards), Ethan Weinrich (SAIL), Catherine Wilhelm (Lincoln), Blake Williams (Chiles)

Journalism: Reagan Anderson (Lincoln), Meghan Biggins (Chiles), Ruth Castro (Godby), Cassidy Craig (Maclay), Nolan Johnson (SAIL), Nathan Rabideau (JP II), Faydra Richardson (Rickards), John Smith-Schoenwalder (Leon), Celita Summa (FSUS)

Leadership: Alyson Blakeley (Godby), Arjani Claitt (FAMU DRS), Tanner Clemons (NFC), James DiMarco (JP II), Carlton DiSalvo (Leon), Taylar Hall (Lincoln), Shavon Jones (Rickards), Bethany Litteral (Home School), Brianna Lord (Chiles), Mariam Mckee (FSUS), Amanda Post (CCS), Sona Wiard (SAIL), Bliss Wilson (Maclay)

Mathematics: Jackson Atwater (Leon), Jessica Folsom (FSUS), Jacqueline Golabek (JP II), Amelia Maddox (SAIL), Arya Okten (Chiles), Sadhana Ponnaluri (Maclay), Puneet Sachdeva (Rickards), Jacob Spainhour (Lincoln), Serenity Williams (Godby)

Music: James Aagaard (Home School), Lauryn Brown (Godby), Mara Eichin (Lincoln), Christie Ger (JP II), Sam Ingerman (Maclay), Adam Rusmisell (SAIL), Grady Shafer (NFC), Leah Shashaty (CCS), Ashleigh Smith (Chiles), Genesis Stackhouse (FSUS), Foster Tempson (Rickards), Tiffany Vaughn (Leon)

Public Speaking: Miranda Brown (FSUS), Velvet Brown (FAMU DRS), Chelsea Francois (Godby), Zenani Johnson (Rickards), Irfan Kovankaya (Lincoln), Joe Lavoie (Chiles), Diamond Robinson (JP II), David Saff (Maclay), Caleb Stephens (Home School), Elyse Thompson (Leon)

Science & Health: Amara Ahmed (Rickards), Alexander Alabugin (Chiles), Shelby Boykin (Leon), Rebecca Caudill (NFC), Christian Davis (Godby), David Maldonado (FSUS), Grace Murray (JP II), Aneesh Rahangdale (Maclay), Kaleigh Wingate (Lincoln)

Social Science: Graham Boone (Lincoln), Megan Choutupalli (FSUS), Samantha Edgar (Chiles), Quinnella Griggs (FAMU DRS), Angela Groszos (Leon), Marcus Lloyd (Godby), John Marsh (NFC), Andrew Mixson (JP II), Elery Ostertag (SAIL), Mark Salters (Maclay), Aditya Srivastava (Rickards)

Technology: Daniel Becker (Maclay), Halie Dawkins (JP II), Micah Luster-Harvey (Godby), Ram Manickam (SAIL), Jessica McNeil (Chiles), Chason Scruggs (FSUS), Joseph Thyer (Lincoln), Daniel Volya (Leon), Christopher Witmer (Rickards)

For more information on the Best & Brightest Awards, visit
www.thebestandbrightestawards.com.

<http://www.tallahassee.com/story/life/family/2016/03/08/service-achievement-define-best-brightest-leon-county-high-schools/81265094/>