

PRESS RELEASE

RCI Names 2009 Georgia Caregivers of the Year

Award recipients to be honored by former first lady

Americus GA, Sept. 2009: When someone falls ill or is disabled in some way, that individual may come to rely on the assistance of others in a variety of ways. Those who provide that assistance are called caregivers. There are family caregivers who assume this responsibility out of a sense of love or duty. There are individuals who have made their career in caregiving. Then there are the volunteers who generously give of their time through acts of kindness and support to others in their community.

The Rosalyann Carter Institute for Caregiving (RCI) recognizes one caregiver in each of these categories each year through its Georgia Caregiver of the Year awards and banquet. The award winners are selected from a pool of regional winners submitted by each of twelve CARE-NETs around the state. Established through the RCI, CARE-NETs provide advocacy, training, and other services to family and professional caregivers in their local communities.

Choosing one winner from among so many deserving nominees for each group is an extremely challenging task, according to RCI staffer Gayle Alston. "As the committee members read each of the nominating essays, we are struck by the unrelenting spirit of compassion and devotion described," states Alston. "As extraordinary as each essay is, we know that there are literally thousands more caregivers around the state carrying out equally important and valuable care for others. Every caregiver deserves our admiration and gratitude."

RCI is pleased to announce the selections for the 2009 Georgia Caregiver of the Year Award and to share their remarkable stories:

Family Caregiver: Starling Mercer Nominated by Southern Georgia CARE-NET

When his father's stroke left him paralyzed on one side of his body, Starling Mercer became a full-time caregiver. As his daughter relates, "My father doesn't take care of his father because he has to;

he does it because his heart wants to. For an impatient man almost 60 who was used to riding in rodeos and farming from sunrise to dark, it has been a transformation grounded in love, compassion, and the truest spirit of giving that a son, and a father, can possess." From readily disposing of his much loved pool table in the game room that became his father's room, to painstakingly making his father's oft-loved hunting trips accessible, to spending time with other family caregivers offering support and helpful information, Starling Mercer has demonstrated the true art of family caregiving. He reminds us that that such care is not solely "women's work" and that the seemingly toughest among us can have the most caring hearts.

Volunteer Caregiver: Larry Russell
Nominated by Northwest Georgia CARE-NET

As a young man on the battlefield in Viet Nam, Larry Russell made a promise to God to give a life of service to others if his own life were spared. Since that time, he has made good on that promise, serving as an ordained minister, a medical chaplain, and a tireless supporter of veterans in need. Out of his concern for the aging of this population, he established a support group for veterans with Alzheimer's and other dementias. In this capacity he leads groups, makes home visits to absent members and promotes dementia art programs in his community. As he continues to honor his pledge, conducting burial services for deceased veterans who do not have a church, writing letters to obtain Veterans Affairs' benefits for families (at last count over 2000), and working with his local Alzheimer's Association, Larry Russell prompts the individual nominating him to state: "Everyone who meets Larry Russell knows immediately that he or she is meeting an angel with stars and stripes on his wings."

Paraprofessional Caregiver: Jeannie Adams
Nominated by Northeast Georgia CARE-NET

When a senior center client of this personal support aide had nowhere to go for the holidays, he had Thanksgiving and Christmas dinner at her family's table. When a wheelchair bound elderly client with cerebral palsy needed companionship, she was invited to her aide's house for Easter egg hunts, cook-outs and birthday parties. And when this client needed greater mobility, her aide accomplished what professionals had not and found her a lift for her car. When another client didn't have clothing that fit, she went to thrift stores and bought clothing for him herself. In countless ways such as these, Jeannie Adams had demonstrated that caregiving as a profession is not just about earning a paycheck or working an eight-hour day, but about seeing the true needs of people they serve and giving more than is required.

These three individuals will be recognized at the RCI 2009 Awards Banquet on October 22 at Georgia Southwestern State University in Americus. Each honoree will receive a gilded rose and a check for \$1000, presented by former first lady and RCI founder and Board President Rosalynn Carter. For further information about the caregiver awards, the Rosalynn Carter Institute or local CARE-NETs, contact: rci@canes.gsw.edu or visit the web site at www.rosalynncarter.org.