



NEWS RELEASE

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Hopewell Recreation and Parks Earns Top Honors During Virginia Recreation and Park Society Conference

Hopewell, Virginia - During the 67th Annual Conference of the Virginia Recreation and Park Society (VRPS) held recently in Harrisonburg, Virginia, over 400 attendees gathered from around the Commonwealth to connect and collaborate on areas of common interest.

Each year, the VRPS conference hosts a formal presentation of awards honoring individuals, departments, and organizations throughout Virginia who have demonstrated excellence in a variety of areas. This year, the Society's Awards and Citations Committee received 115 submissions vying for awards in 15 categories.

Judged by a panel of peers, Hopewell Recreation and Parks was recognized more than any other organization in Virginia, walking away with eight (8) awards during the 2021 ceremony. This is the first time in the department's history that it has been recognized in eight separate categories.

Hopewell Recreation and Parks' department awards include: Best New Environmental Sustainability Award - Woodlawn Urban Orchard; Best New Program Award - Young Athletes; Best New Special Event Award - Pumpkin Patrol; Snapshot Moment - Personal Sacrifice and Dedication; Best Health and Wellness Initiative - Citywide Personal Protective Equipment Distribution; Most Innovative Marketing Piece - Santa Sightings Tree Lighting.

In addition to the department awards, two Hopewell Recreation and Parks employees were honored with individual awards. These awards are the most prestigious of the program and are offered to professionals who have demonstrated exemplary performance in support of the Society and in the field.

The Outstanding New Professional award was presented to AJ McCage, Hopewell Recreation and Parks Community Programs Supervisor. Miss McCage is responsible for building and expanding therapeutic recreation programming in both Hopewell and Colonial Heights. She has strengthened the department's relationship with Hopewell City Public Schools and currently serves on their Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC).

The Distinguished Service Award was presented to Hopewell Recreation and Parks Director, Aaron Reidmiller. The Distinguished Service Award, second only to the Fellows Award, is one of the Society's highest honors and includes an elite group who have displayed continuous outstanding service to the profession and the community. Mr. Reidmiller has served as a member of VRPS since 2009 and has held multiple leadership roles including CSA Chair, Senior Games Competition Chair, and Student Engagement Liaison. For the past seven years, Mr. Reidmiller has served on the VRPS Board of Directors and was appointed president in 2018, making him the youngest professional in the Society's history to hold that title.

Hopewell Recreation and Parks strives to improve the overall health and well-being of the community through a variety of recreational activities and facilities. The department offers hundreds of programs and events each year, and manages more than 200 acres of park lands throughout the City. To learn more about Hopewell Recreation and Parks, please visit www.hopewellrecandparks.com.

Full descriptions of the department awards are included below.

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Best New Environmental Sustainability Award-Woodlawn Urban Orchard

Hopewell Recreation and Parks teamed up with the Hopewell Tree Stewards, Hopewell City Public Schools, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and the Virginia Department of Forestry to plant an urban orchard on the campus of the Woodlawn Learning Center. More than 40 community volunteers assisted with planting 32 trees, including varieties that produce fruits or nuts that can be harvested by the community. The orchard will serve as an outdoor classroom for students and community members to learn about tree care, healthy eating, and environmental education. The project was funded by the Virginia Department of Forestry's Trees for Clean Water Program via the Hopewell Recreation and Parks Foundation.

Best New Program Award-Young Athletes

Hopewell Recreation and Parks initiated the Young Athletes program in cooperation with Special Olympics Virginia and Hopewell City Public Schools. Young Athletes is an inclusive sports and play program for children with and without disabilities that focuses on skills like balance, flexibility, strength, and coordination. The program was held at the Woodlawn Learning Center twice a week for eight weeks and was facilitated by Community Programs Supervisor, AJ McCage (CTRS). The program is the first of its kind to be implemented by Hopewell Recreation and Parks as a part of the instructional school day and was made possible with \$4,000 of technical assistance and in-kind support provided by Special Olympics Virginia.

Best New Special Event Award-Pumpkin Patrol

In an effort to offer fall programming during the height of the pandemic, Tabitha Martinez, Recreation Programs Manager, presented the creative idea of a Pumpkin Patrol traveling pumpkin patch. Staff adorned a utility trailer with hay bales, corn stalks, an ornate farm backdrop, and plenty of pumpkins before visiting the homes of registered participants. Each child got to pick their perfect pumpkin before posing for a photo with a friendly scarecrow. The program served 92 families and was offered free of charge.

Snapshot Moment-Personal Sacrifice and Dedication

The department's submission for best snapshot moment depicts Community Programs Supervisor, AJ McCage, interacting with a child with disabilities during a REC Classroom field trip at the Hopewell Community Center. At the time of the photo, AJ was seven months pregnant and dealing with a significant medical condition. Those two hurdles didn't prevent her from creating an unforgettable experience for the child and making the program a huge success.

Best Health and Wellness Initiative-Citywide Personal Protective Equipment Distribution

During the pandemic, the department was tasked with managing emergency operations logistics for the community. When the City received a large supply of face coverings and hand sanitizer, the department quickly mobilized to assemble more than 10,000 "PPE Kits" and deliver them to the doorsteps of every Hopewell resident. A team of 8-10 staff, using a fleet of golf carts, distributed the kits to all homes in a period of 10 days. This approach was the most effective way to ensure that Hopewell's most vulnerable populations would have the necessary personal protective equipment to combat the transmission of COVID-19 in the community.

Most Innovative Marketing Piece-Santa Sightings Tree Lighting

Due to capacity restrictions and other concerns related to the pandemic, the department could not host its annual grand illumination of the City's Christmas tree, which usually marks the start of the holiday season and draws large crowds. As a creative alternative, staff filmed a scene that depicted security camera footage of Santa wandering through the Ashford Civic Plaza on his way back to the North Pole. When he noticed that the tree was dark, he used a little Christmas spirit and a flick of the wrist to illuminate the entire plaza

before disappearing into the night. The video was filmed on an iPhone and edited with the Video Shop app. To date, the video has been viewed over 4,000 times.

Outstanding New Professional-AJ McCage, Community Programs Supervisor

Miss McCage is responsible for building and expanding therapeutic recreation programming in both Hopewell and Colonial Heights. She has strengthened the department's relationship with Hopewell City Public Schools and currently serves on their Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). AJ has also built new relationships with organizations like Sportable and Special Olympics Virginia. She was recognized as a member of the National Recreation and Park Association's 30 Under 30 program which highlights the best and brightest young professionals from across the nation and Co-chairs NRPA's Leadership Development Network. She currently serves as the Co-Chair of the VRPS Leadership Training Institute and Chair of the Central Service Area. She is pursuing a graduate degree from Clemson University in Youth Development Leadership which she hopes to apply to the recreation field.

Distinguished Service Award-Aaron Reidmiller, Director

The Distinguished Service Award, second only to the Fellows Award, is one of the Society's highest honors and includes an elite group who have displayed continuous outstanding service to the profession and the community. Mr. Reidmiller has served as a member of VRPS since 2009 and has held a variety of leadership roles including CSA Chair, Senior Games Competition Chair, and Student Engagement Liaison. For the past seven years, Aaron has served on the VRPS Board of Directors and was appointed president in 2018, making him the youngest professional in the Society's history to hold that title. Aaron was recognized as the Outstanding New Professional in 2012 and has received numerous department awards throughout his career. He has assembled a team of the field's most accomplished professionals in Hopewell where he has strengthened community relationships, improved department efficiency, introduced new events and programming, and brought forth new sources of funding. Aaron has been instrumental in the design and renovation of numerous parks in Hopewell and has been managing the development of the Hopewell Riverwalk since its inception.