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Heart of Florida United Way Honors Those Who Made a Significant Impact on Central Florida Over the Past Year

11 Honorees Celebrated as Part of 4th Annual Change Maker Impact Awards, including Education Heroes as Change Makers of the Year

ORLANDO, Fla. (Nov. 2, 2021) – In all corners of the Central Florida community, there are people making a difference. Through the 4th Annual Change Maker Impact Awards, Heart of Florida United Way honored passionate individuals and organizations who have contributed significant and lasting change in the community over the past year. Recently held virtually, the event unveiled the four Community Choice honorees and highlighted six individuals honored with the LIVE UNITED Impact Award for Leadership and the Change Maker of the Year.

“The devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have deeply impacted the education, health and financial stability of Central Floridians, pushing families to the brink of disaster,” said Jeff Hayward, president & CEO, Heart of Florida United Way. “But Central Floridians always have a remarkable way of caring for each other. There are always dedicated people and organizations who respond by donating their time, talents, treasure and voice to help those in need. This is exactly why Heart of Florida United Way started the Change Maker Impact Awards four years ago. Every single one – and those who were nominated through the community – deserve to be recognized for their efforts across our community.”

This year, the LIVE UNITED Impact Award for Leadership was given to George Aguel, president/CEO of Visit Orlando (retired); Dave Krepcho, president/CEO of Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida; Rich Maladecki, president/CEO (retired) of the Central Florida Hotel and Lodging Association; Chief Judge Frederick Lauten, Ninth Judicial Circuit Court (retired); Linda Sutherland, executive director of the Healthy Start Coalition of Orange County (retired); and Karen Willis, CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of Orange County.

The honorees from the Community Choice public nominations were revealed during the event. The Mission United Impact Award recognizes a champion for Veterans, or an outstanding service member who has contributed significantly to serving veterans and being a positive change for them in Central Florida. This is a new category to the awards and it went to Fred Robinson, retired U.S. Marine and veteran liaison for Vitas Healthcare.

Robinson volunteers, educates, and supports veterans regardless of time, cost and recognition. With relationships throughout the veteran community all the way to the Pentagon, he is known
for lifting his voice to advocate for the veterans of Central Florida, making a difference in their lives at a critical time – end-of-life care. Robinson performs Bedside Salute Ceremonies at all hours of the day or night and created a drive-thru, COVID-safe, Pinning Ceremony for Vietnam Veterans. He is dedicated for ‘serving those who served.’

The **WOMEN UNITED® Impact Award** recognizes a woman leading and inspiring change in Central Florida. This individual leads with purpose and has a strong commitment to serving others, empowering neighbors and making a lasting impact on the community. This, too, is a new category to the awards and it went to **Secily Wilson**, founder of WOW Legacy Group.

Wilson empowers other women daily through her positive messaging. As a stroke survivor, she is an unstoppable force for changing perceptions, challenging paradigms and helping all women. Wilson has always been there for women throughout the community reminding them that when they fall, they can get up stronger and better than before. As a result, she coined the phrase, “fall into fabulous” and has successfully led the W.O.W. program.

The **Change Maker Junior** Award celebrates contributions to Central Florida made by the regions youngest leaders. **Zechariah Cartledge** was nominated by Orange County Sheriff John Mina who was given the privilege to honor him. Cartledge always had a deep respect for first responders and developed a passion for running at the age of five years old. By the time he was seven, he began competing in various 5k races across Central Florida. After participating in the Tunnel to Towers 5k in Orlando, he decided to create Running 4 Heroes, a 501(c)(3) that honors every first responder lost in the line of duty. It also supports those injured on-duty. Cartledge also runs one mile carrying a flag in honor of the fallen officer.

The **Unsung Hero Award** recognizes a person or organization making significant contributions to the Central Florida community when no one is looking. **Jen Vargas** was recognized for her humble service and broad dedication to the community. By day, she’s a producer in film and television. By night and during her spare time, she volunteers for a variety of organizations – American Cancer Society, Give Kids the World, Second Harvest Food Bank of Central Florida, and Coalition for the Homeless. During the pandemic lockdown, Vargas also was a volunteer driver for Orlando Face Mask Strong and the Million Mask Challenge, helping to get hand-sewn face masks to local hospitals and organizations that were in urgent need.

Vargas is also an advocate for equality and inclusion and is one of the original Pulse Angel volunteers, appearing in memory of those who tragically lost during the incident by wearing eight-foot PVC wings. In addition, she is “producer, host and heart and soul” of FilmSlam at the Orlando Museum of Art; and is a champion for family caregivers and advocate for self-care.

Finally, the **Change Maker of the Year** was awarded to **Heroes in Education**. Hayward said, “This year, our Change Makers of the Year will be awarded to Orange, Seminole and Osceola School Districts’ instructional staff, administration and support professionals. They are our educational heroes day in and day out. Not only were they tasked with educating our children in an all new way, but they also played the role of advocate to ensure children’s and families’ basic needs were met. Additionally, they put their own health on the line through the pandemic. Our local Heroes in Education have shown their commitment to our community, our children’s
education, our families’ well-being and have remained adaptable through it all. This is why they are our Change Makers of the Year."

To learn more about the event and to see past award recipients, visit hfuw.org/changemaker. Visit hfuw.org to learn more about Heart of Florida United Way.

About Heart of Florida United Way
Heart of Florida United Way (HFUW) is Central Florida’s most comprehensive health and human services charity and the largest provider of funds to the region's most critical health and human service programs. In 2018-19, it raised and managed more than $22.4 million in total resources, including $16.6 million raised for the Community Fund that invests in dozens of vitally important programs in the community throughout Orange, Osceola and Seminole counties. HFUW fights for the health, education and financial stability of every person in Central Florida. It operates United Way 2-1-1, Central Florida’s information and assistance, crisis, suicide and referral helpline; Volunteer Resource Center and the Ryan White program, which administers nearly $3.2 million to provide HIV/AIDS services and referrals. HFUW impacts more than 400,000 individuals annually through its direct service and funded programs. United Way partners with local businesses, government, other charities to increase awareness of local health and human service issues and to inspire hope, provide options and create possibilities for people in need. Visit www.HFUW.org for more information, or call (407) 835-0900. Follow us on Facebook at Heart of Florida United Way and on Twitter and Instagram @hfuw.

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