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WELCOME TO STARS OF THE BANNER 2025!

This spring, the Dorchester Banner invited the community to vote in the ultimate readers' poll: Stars of the Banner. This is a chance to honor the people who not only promote excellence in business, education and non-profits — but who make Dorchester County such a unique and wonderful place to call home. The pages of this publication are filled with the nominees who make Dorchester shine. Now, the entire community is invited to come celebrate with the Stars who make it shine. On Thursday, May 22, the Banner will host an in-person event at the Gerry Boyle Park at Great Marsh, on Somerset Avenue in Cambridge, MD, where we will honor the Stars of the Banner and your Hometown Heroes. The public event, which is free, will run from 4:30 to 8 p.m. Everyone is welcome and encouraged to attend. The celebration will include live mu-

sic by Endless Embers, food, on-stage presentations of the Hometown Heroes awards, "Winners Circle" where Stars winners can have their photo taken, exhibits from some of the Stars and finalists, door prizes and more! Food will be available for purchase from Scottish Highland Creamery, That Kitchen, Mrs. Martins Cookies and K&S Lemonade. Door prizes offered by the Dorchester Banner.

HONORING OUR HOMETOWN HEROES

One aspect of the Stars of the Banner that makes the contest especially distinctive is that it incorporates the Banner's annual tribute to our "Hometown Heroes." For many years now, readers have nominated local folks who "fly beneath the radar," but whose quiet efforts and commitment to helping others make this community such

a great place to live, work and play. There are so many people trying to make a difference who rarely receive the attention they deserve. "Hometown Heroes" is our salute to your friends and neighbors who never go looking for attention, but truly deserve it. We invite you to read about these individuals, and please join the Stars of the Banner Celebration on May 22. Learn more at DelmarvaEvents.net. We hope to see you there!

We appreciate the support of our sponsors: Chesapeake Utilities Corp. and Hometown Heroes Sponsor, Choptank Electric Cooperative. We couldn't put on the party without them!

Don't miss the fun! Bring your blanket or lawn chair and enjoy an evening of community fun!

Tonda Parks, Associate Publisher

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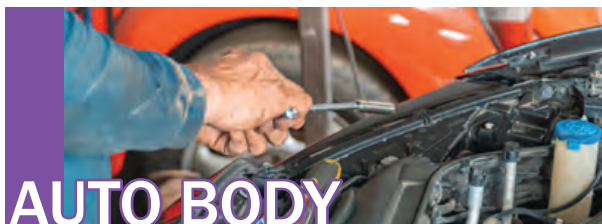


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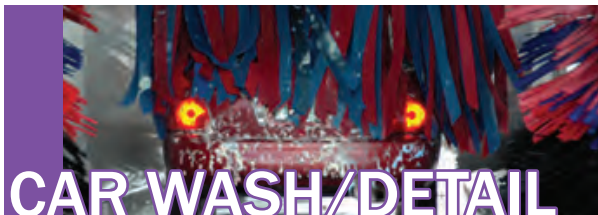
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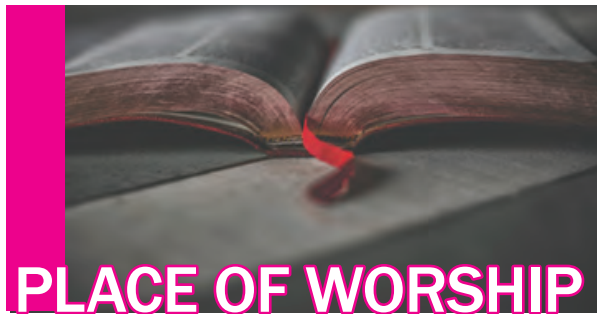
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COMMUNITY

HOMETOWN HEROES

2025

Each year, we honor the Hometown Heroes who go above and beyond to make Dorchester County a better place. These groups and individuals were nominated by people in the community who have seen the difference a good deed can make.

Interviews and text by Carrie Samis.



DIANA RATHELL

Diana Rathell is the owner of Kitty Kat Kottage, located in East New Market, MD. For the past 15 years, she has dedicated her time and resources to caring for cats of all kinds. Rathell works with related agencies and with members of the community to help cats in need and, in many instances, to help the people who care for them, too. Her passion project started in her daughter's garage. Demand for her services grew exponentially. Six years ago, Rathell knew she needed more space, so she put a shed in her yard, specifically for cats. Fortunately, as the need for her services rose, so did support from the community. Over the years, donations have poured in. Currently, Rathell is caring for five female cats and their 16 newborn kittens. She works closely within her network to find good homes for all of them. Since 2020, Rathell has found loving homes for nearly 1,700 cats. It's a full-time commitment, for sure.

In addition to rescuing, fostering, and rehoming cats, Rathell also helps tame feral cats. But that's not all. In an effort to address cats in communities and overpopulation, each week, she fields calls, traps cats and transports them to clinics for neutering. While she prefers to find good homes for cats, and loving caregivers, Rathell recognizes that neutering is an important component to effective cat population control. "Fixing" cats prevents more unwanted kittens. Trap-Neuter-Return (TNR) efforts include humanely trapping cats in the community, transporting them to clinics to be spayed or neutered, providing vaccinations and health checks, and returning them to their original location. Clinics are held every Thursday. So, on Wednesdays, Rathell is often out setting traps and checking them in the middle of the night. Her efforts often require round-the-clock attention. In the last month, she's handled requests to and provided TNR services for over 30 cats. In one recent instance, Rathell provided TNR services for 32 cats from one yard and removed and rehomed 46 kittens from the same property. That's quite a task but it makes a tremendous difference, helping the community and helping cats. Rathell says, "I try to

help where I can. If you have all these animals but they're not fixed, you're part of the problem. There are resources to help. If you don't have the time, don't have the money or don't have a trap, I can help. There's no excuse for having an animal that's not fixed."

Of course, Rathell doesn't do all of this alone. Her husband, daughters and grand-daughter help, too, along with volunteers from the community. One volunteer specifically helps with transporting cats to and from clinics. Rathell often uses Facebook as a mechanism to reach the community. When she has a need for supplies or financial assistance with a vet bill, community members happily help. Regular donations of cat litter, food and more help to sustain the operation. A lot of the cat-caregiver matchmaking occurs by word-of-mouth, ensuring that cats are adopted. Many adoptive cat parents are repeat customers. Some cats are even matched with new owners in other states. Those who adopt from Rathell sign a contract, requiring that cats be fixed when old enough and kept indoors. If, for any reason, a match doesn't work out, the contract requires that cats be returned to Rathell. "No questions asked," Rathell emphasizes, "I spend hours taking cats off the streets. I want adoptions to be a good fit for everyone. If it doesn't work out, I'll take the cat back and find it a more suitable situation."

Many shelters and rescue organization focus on dogs. Rathell is all about cats. While Rathell dedicates a tremendous amount of time and financial resources, she emphasizes, "I couldn't do it without support from family, friends and the community. I do it because I love animals - and I'm a little crazy. I offer the biggest thank you I could ever write to my community. I couldn't do it without such support. At the end of the day, I feel good about what I do. It all comes together."

For those who would like to help with donations of supplies, vet bills and other support, please contact Kitty Kat Kottage:
3711 Elliott Drive
East New Market, MD 21613
Phone (410) 463-1278
Email rathell@comcast.net



"I couldn't do it without support from family, friends and the community. I do it because I love animals - and I'm a little crazy. I offer the biggest thank you I could ever write to my community. I couldn't do it without such support. At the end of the day, I feel good about what I do. It all comes together."



"The beauty is that people partner, here. They don't compete with each other. They work together to help."

MARY HANDLEY

Though Mary Handley was born in Baltimore County, she grew up in Dorchester County, and this is where her heart is firmly planted. "I remember moving to Dorchester, vividly, when I was 9 years old. I loved it, here, immediately. It's such a beautiful place," says Handley. Throughout her life in Dorchester County, Handley has always had the people of the region in her heart. She has devoted both her professional and personal life to sharing her passion for this place and to serving the people who live here. Handley, who lives on the outskirts of Cambridge with her husband, Bill, says "I have had the good fortune to love and to advocate for Dorchester County places and people professionally and personally."

For 18 years, Handley conducted community programming at the Dorchester Public Library. In that position, she really got to know the community and a lot of people had the opportunity to get to know her, too. Following her tenure at the library, Handley worked for Delmarva Community Services, a Cambridge-based nonprofit which provides vital human services. Handley served as the Mobility Manager, providing public transportation for Dorchester, Talbot, Kent and Caroline County. Her passion was serving those in the aging programs, which includes senior centers, home-delivered meals and financial assistance for those in need. Most recently, Handley was selected to serve as the Regional Public Engagement Officer for MD Comptroller Brooke Lierman. She's held that position for the past two years, serving as an advocate for all the the Eastern Shore.

Outside of her professional life, Handley says she is a "community lover and activist. I always have been. I believe if you love something, you need to serve it." Handley clearly loves Dorchester and serves the community in many ways. She's served on the University of Maryland Extension Service Advisory Committee. She

helps to raise funds for the American Cancer Society through Relay for Life. She is a crew member on the skipjack Nathan, too, helping to preserve local culture. Handley is also an informal member of "like-minded activists," a bipartisan community effort to respond to current threatening conditions. The group works to identify and address local needs, providing food for the homeless shelter, participating in blood drives, aiding Little League, and more.

Handley is especially enthusiastic about a new effort: Blackwater Rising. "I'm super engaged," says Handley. Blackwater Rising is a new nonprofit making an effort to bridge communities throughout Cambridge through community gardening. The gardens provide fresh, locally-grown produce for food insecure individuals. But, according to Handley, the most important part is that while growing food together, for the greater good, those involved are intentionally getting to know each other. That promotes understanding and empathy. "We're neighbors working together for a greater cause," explains Handley, "helping at both the Locust Street Garden and Bethel Church Garden." In June, Blackwater Rising is partnering with Moms Demand Action, to promote public safety measures that can help protect people from gun violence.

Handley loves community partnership. "The beauty is that people partner, here. They don't compete with each other. They work together to help," she says. "Together, we're addressing historical divisions, not hostile divisions. We're being intentional about bridging those gaps, bringing people together through those divisions. We are the helpers. We want to be established and recognized as the helpers in the community, so people know they can come to us," she continues. Handley's love for community runs deep. The work takes intentional effort and time. "We are traveling at the speed of trust," says Handley.

AMANDA LEONARD

Amanda Leonard currently serves as Dorchester County State's Attorney. After serving in an interim capacity, the Dorchester County native, was elected as Dorchester County State's Attorney in 2022. Along with her brother Jason, Leonard was raised by parents Dave Leonard, a banker, and Kim Leonard, a teacher. They instilled an understanding of the value of education, a strong work ethic, and a sense of community.

Leonard started working at the age of 14, graduated from Cambridge South Dorchester, earned an undergraduate degree from Juniata College and obtained her law degree from University of Baltimore School of Law. Excited to return to the Eastern Shore, Leonard served a clerkship in Wicomico County and then accepted a position as Assistant State's Attorney in Dorchester in 2016. Now, as Dorchester County State's Attorney, Leonard continues her passion in service to the community.

"Prosecuting crimes, assisting true victims, and providing a service to the community is what I am meant to do," says Leonard. She is especially happy to do it in the county she loves, her lifelong home. Leonard focuses on public safety, collaboration, and strong community relationships. Her rapport with law enforcement, agencies and community members serves her well and helps her serve the people of Dorchester more efficiently and effectively. Leonard works diligently to honor and to serve, with dignity and compassion, the citizens of Dorchester County. Leonard handles her role with grace and humility, often serving as a voice for victims, those struggling with mental health, addiction and more. She cares deeply about every person in Dorchester, helping others every day.



"Prosecuting crimes, assisting true victims, and providing a service to the community is what I am meant to do."



"We've participated in as many activities as we could for kids - rides to children's hospitals, visits to cancer patients, meal deliveries to the families of fallen officers, Special Olympics - whatever we can do,"

DESCENDANTS LEMC

Although the Descendants Law Enforcement Motor Club (LEMC) has been active for less than a year, they are already making a big impact in Dorchester County. The motorcycle club is a group of first responders of all types. In order to qualify for membership, individuals must have prior or current military, law enforcement or first responder experience. The club officially formed in July of 2024. John Payne, "Tattoo," serves as Descendants LEMC state president. John Gilliard, "Gills," serves as the local chapter president. In all, there are nine members, each with their own "road name." Together, "Tattoo," "Gills," "Slick," "Mama Bear," "Mac-Gyver," "Reckless," "Chaos," "Elmer Fudd," and "Pipes," the youngest member, who just turned 18, ride for a cause - to help the community, especially children and families of first responders.

Each member has a deep love of motorcycle riding and a strong commitment to community. The Descendants LEMC Eastern Shore/MD Chapter organizes and participates in charitable events and rides with other LEMC brother and sister clubs in the Delmarva region.

Currently, Descendants LEMC chapters are established in 15 states. Tattoo has been riding motorcycles most of his life. His neighbor, Hard Crab, is a state trooper and wanted to start a Maryland chapter. So, they gathered together some other folks and, since July of last year, "we've participated in as many activities as we could for kids - rides to children's hospitals, visits to cancer patients, meal deliveries to the families of fallen officers, Special Olympics - whatever

we can do," explained Tattoo, who drives a tractor trailer for a living. His wife, Mama Bear, a daycare operator, is also a member. Aptly named, Tattoo has 75 tattoos inked on his body, including one, a blue elephant, in memory of Ellie, a child who suffered with brain cancer. Tattoo has been riding for over 35 years, "there's nothing like being on a motorcycle," he says. It's definitely a family affair; his wife rides, too. Together, Tattoo and Mama Bear are parents to seven children. "I love kids," says Tattoo, "I do it to see the smiles on their faces. People don't always understand the struggles of others. The more I do for others, the happier I am. If I can give you the shirt off my back, because you need it, I will. Kids with terminal cancer but smiling every day - that's tough. I don't take it for granted."

Dorchester chapter president Jason Gilliard "Gills," who served in the Coast Guard, says the group is working to secure nonprofit status. "Right now, everything we do is with our own money but once we become an official nonprofit, we'll be able to raise funding to do more," says Gills. "Basically," he continues, "what we do for law enforcement, family of law enforcement, military - we provide for families - funerals, escorted rides, that sort of thing. We're quite small but we do as much as we can. I've rode motorcycles my whole life. When I was young my father rode a motorcycle and took me with him. He wrapped bungee cords around me so I wouldn't fall off. We still ride together. My wife rides, too, and now my children are learning to ride. In high school, I was one of the only kids who rode. I've always done

benefit rides. I wanted to get with other people to make a larger impact. I wanted to be with good people - I didn't want any part of gangs or anything like that."

Gills was recruited by another friend and loves being involved with the Descendants. "My favorite thing is to be able to help people and I get to ride my motorcycle while doing it. As chapter president I reach out to other clubs and people who are doing benefits to see if we are welcome to participate, compile information and organize rides, and just figure out what we can do to help," he says.

Last year, Descendants LEMC adopted two families for Christmas, ensuring those families had food, gifts and more. "It really hit me," Gills says, "it was really emotional. Every one of them - I get emotional. I can't wait to become a nonprofit so we can really start helping even more." They partnered with the local VFW to host "Breakfast with the Grinch," and participated in Wreaths Across America, too, laying wreaths on graves of fallen service members. This month, the group is participating in a Poker Run to raise money for a charity and they are driving by a young boy's home to help celebrate his birthday. The young Queen Anne's County resident has a particular fascination with motorcycles. Gills emphasized, "I love the feeling of freedom when I ride - I'm riding any problems I have disappear - it's kind of Zen for me." Tattoo shares a similar sentiment, "it's my peace. It's wind therapy. All my bad thoughts & worries go away," but even more importantly, he added, "not all motorcyclists are bad, we are here to help the community." On behalf of Descendants LEMC, Gills, who said he was "grinning from ear to ear" when he learned of the nomination, expressed deep gratitude for recognition from the community.

Follow Descendants LEMC Eastern Shore/MD Chapter on Facebook to stay up-to-date on their local efforts to serve Dorchester.

HONORING PAST HOMETOWN HEROES

2024

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ALL4LOVE
Michael Wheatley

Bernard Johnson
Hugh Middleton
Anne Watts & John Lewis

2023

Juanita Darby
Trevor Geer
Sergio L. Martinez Sr.
Shantay Linder

David Phillips

Patricia Prosser
Martha (Mauk) Kral
Shane Walker
Kortnie Askins

2022

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Auxiliary of the Eastern Shore

Hospital Center
Justin Todd
Simmons Center Market

2021

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