



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Lace Keaton
lkeaton@newtonlibraries.org

Jan. 8, 2021

Georgia Public Library Service is pleased to announce the recipients of the 2020 Georgia Public Library Awards, which honor the people and places that have made a profound difference in their communities through public libraries.

“I’m so proud of our library staff and supporters across the state, who, despite the challenges of operating during a global pandemic, found new ways to help patrons access books, resources, internet, and so much more,” said State Librarian Julie Walker. “Their efforts to ensure that our libraries were able to continue and enhance their meaningful, vital work have allowed Georgians to achieve their goals at any stage in life. It is clear that public libraries remain at the heart of Georgia’s communities.”

Award winners are selected from nominations submitted by library patrons, trustees, Friends, and staff, showcasing the best and brightest who serve in public libraries throughout the state. This year marked the most nominations ever received, reflecting the significant impact libraries have had in their communities.

PUBLIC LIBRARY CHAMPION OF THE YEAR

Georgia’s Public Library Champion of the Year is Dr. Steve Whatley, former board chair and longtime trustee at the Newton County Library System. Dr. Whatley was an educator for more than 36 years, including serving as Superintendent of Newton County School District prior to his retirement in 2010. Champion of the year is presented to an outstanding advocate who is not employed by a public library, but whose support significantly raised the profile of libraries and improved services.

“Over the past 10 years, the library system has faced severe budget cuts, two recessions, a pandemic and a series of staff layoffs,” said Lace Keaton, director of the Newton County Library System. “During this time, Dr. Whatley’s steadfast leadership successfully guided us through many difficult days. On each and every occasion, he was well prepared, on time, and knowledgeable about all library issues.”

Keaton recalled one time when the budget didn’t allow the purchase of needed new library chairs, and Dr. Whatley led a project to refinish 121 chairs by recruiting volunteers, supervising the process, and laboring every day for four hours over six weeks.

This year, Dr. Whatley guided the library board through important decisions to continue meeting community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. His advocacy and leadership efforts on behalf of the library remained steady until he and his wife both contracted COVID-19. Dr. Whatley’s wife of

over 50 years, Marylynn, succumbed to the illness in September and, while Dr. Whatley recovered, the ordeal led him to step down from the board.

“Even this gesture demonstrates his status as a library champion, as it reflects his sincere belief that the role — that he loves and personally needs more than ever — deserves more than he is able to bring to it under the circumstances,” said Read Gignilliat, library supporter and attorney.

