



Recognition • Education • Achievement • Community Health

SINA's
20th Annual
REACH Awards
Ceremony

Thursday, June 11, 2026

5:00 pm - 8:00 pm

Trinity College
Washington Room in Mather Hall
Hartford, CT

Celebrating Kindness, Honoring Impact.

Since 1825, **Liberty Bank** has been dedicated to helping families throughout Connecticut. Two hundred years later, that commitment remains as strong as ever, by helping to improve the lives of our customers, teammates and communities for generations to come.

We are delighted to partner with organizations like the **Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA)** that serve as a catalyst to foster a vibrant urban community where residents, employees, and businesses can enjoy a high-quality of life and opportunities for success. We are proud to sponsor their annual **Reach Awards** to honor individuals who have made outstanding contributions to the growth and well-being of the Hartford community.

Congratulations to all the 2026 honorees!





PROGRAM

Masters of Ceremonies

Jessica Perez
*Principal Specialist,
Contracts / Civil Space,
Collins Aerospace*

Carmen Diaz
*Manager Customer Service
Call Center / Guest Services,
Hartford Hospital*

Welcome

Luis A. Rivera Diaz
*Senior Manager /
Community Relations,
Connecticut Children's*

Logan Singerman
*Executive Director,
SINA Inc.*

Host Speaker

Dickens Mathieu
*General Counsel and Secretary of the College,
Trinity College*

DINNER

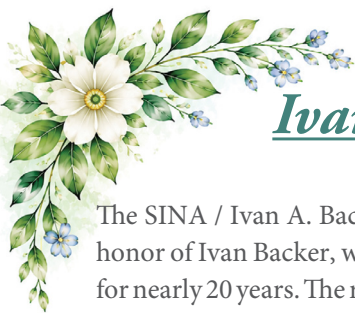
Awards Presentation

Ivan A. Backer Scholarship
Presented by: Linda Torres, Zuleica Castro, and Priscilla Rubio

SINA Student Support Scholarship
Presented by: Linda Torres, Aleidy Dominguez Jorge, Yessica Amparo, and Luis Rivera

Stephen Balcanoff Award
Presented by: Liliana Polley

Neighborhood Service Award
Presented by: Gelda St. Juste and Yvette Young, Josh Peterson, and Victor Cristofaro



Ivan A. Backer Scholarship



The SINA / Ivan A. Backer Scholarship program was established in 1997 in honor of Ivan Backer, who served as founder and executive director of SINA for nearly 20 years. The recipients are selected based on service to community, school, family, and academic achievement. SINA is delighted to celebrate the following students as recipients of our 2026 Ivan A. Backer Scholarships.

Diego Flores Villalba

Diego is a student at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy planning to attend the University of Connecticut. A student-athlete, volunteer, and mentor, Diego values teamwork, leadership, and community involvement. Reflecting on his experiences, he says, "I was able to find people that make me feel like myself and who accept me for who I am."



David Ndimubandi

David is a student at Bulkeley High School planning to study Accounting while continuing his passion for soccer. After immigrating from Rwanda in 2024, David quickly adapted to a new language and culture through determination, academics, and athletics. He says, "Success is not about where you start, but how determined you are to keep moving forward."





Kasiyanna Rihanna Henry

Kasiyanna is a student at Hartford Public High School planning to attend Central Connecticut State University. A dedicated student leader and volunteer, she has grown into a confident advocate for others through her involvement in leadership organizations such as the Outstanding Women of Leadership Society (OWLS) and various community service initiatives. Kasiyanna shares, “These experiences have helped me grow both as a leader and as a person.”



Amilu Valentina Soria

Amilu is a student at Hartford Public High School planning to study Political Science at the University of Connecticut. Through Model UN, athletics, and community service, she has shown resilience, leadership, and determination while adapting to life in a new country. Amilu says, “You have to adapt to any circumstance in life, and if obstacles arise, you must face them with perseverance and determination.”





SINA

Student Support Scholarship



The purpose of the SINA Student Support Scholarship, established in 2012, is to provide much-needed financial support to students who are attending CT State Community College - Capital campus. SINA is delighted to celebrate the following recipients of our 2026 SINA Student Support Scholarship.

Olivia Johnson



Olivia Johnson is a dedicated Health Science student at CT State Capital balancing full-time work, motherhood, and her dream of becoming a registered nurse. A mother of two young children, Olivia has spent more than eleven years working in human services, where she advanced from Direct Support Professional to Program Coordinator, while also serving as a CPR instructor and Abuse and Neglect Investigator.

She hopes to pursue a career as a nurse investigator advocating for vulnerable populations and improving standards of care. “I started from the bottom, and I shined,” she shared during her interview, reflecting on her professional growth and leadership journey. Olivia says becoming a mother helped her grow into a more compassionate and understanding leader, and she remains committed to creating “a stable and secure future” for her family while continuing to advocate for others through healthcare.



Genesis Gabriela Mendez Rodriguez

Genesis Mendez Rodriguez continues to pursue her dream of becoming a physical therapist at CT State Capital while working in the Financial Aid Department and supporting fellow students. Originally from Ecuador, Genesis previously studied nursing, pharmacology, and physiotherapy before moving to the United States four years ago to continue her education and create new opportunities for her future.

Inspired by her parents, both physical therapists, Genesis is passionate about helping patients regain mobility, confidence, and independence. “As a Latina and immigrant, I understand how difficult it can be to access proper healthcare,” she shared. “I want to be someone patients feel comfortable with.” Since receiving this scholarship last year, Genesis has continued to grow academically and personally, strengthening her English skills while remaining committed to serving diverse communities through compassionate healthcare.





Jorge Hernandez Ovalle

Jorge Hernandez Ovalle is pursuing a degree in Criminal Justice at CT State Capital while working as a Workforce Development Specialist at Our Piece of the Pie. Inspired by his experiences mentoring Hartford youth, Jorge hopes to one day become a police officer and use his education to better understand the systems that impact young people and their communities. Through his work, he has seen how guidance, opportunity, and support can help youth build brighter futures, motivating him to continue serving his community through advocacy and public service.

Jorge says this scholarship will help reduce the stress of tuition, books, and other school expenses so he can stay focused on his education and the youth he supports every day. His coworker, Yessica Amparo, describes him as someone with a “genuine commitment to helping others succeed,” adding that his journey “from participant to professional is a reflection of his determination and character.



Katerina Soto Ayavaca

Katerina Soto Ayavaca attends CT State Capital, where she studies Political Science while serving as President of the Social Justice Club and a Student Government Association senator. Passionate about community outreach and advocacy, Katerina hopes to continue her education at Central Connecticut State University and pursue a career in nonprofit and community-focused work. Inspired by her parents' sacrifices and determination, she says, "I want to continue my education to be successful like my parents and make my family proud."

Katerina has revitalized student organizations on campus, organized community service initiatives, and worked with the 4C's union to advocate for students and workers. She shares that this scholarship will help her continue her education, purchase her first computer for school, and "continue to grow, lead, and give back."





Stephen Balcanoff Award



Each year SINA gives out an institutional award, known as the Stephen Balcanoff Award. The award honors long-time SINA board member Steve Balcanoff, who retired in 2020 after more than 40 years at Connecticut Children's. This award recognizes someone whose dedication to community service echoes Steve's, and who is an employee of one of SINA's three anchor institutions.

Erna Alic



When Erna Alic learned she was receiving the 2026 Stephen Balcanoff Award, her first reaction was disbelief. "I was shocked a little bit—like, what did I do?" she said. But for those who know Erna and the countless lives she has touched across Hartford and beyond, the recognition feels deeply deserved.

A Senior Program Manager at Trinity College's Center for Hartford Engagement and Research (CHER), Erna's work is rooted in advocacy, relationship-building, and compassion. Born in Bosnia, she came to Hartford as a refugee with her parents and grew up navigating life as an English language learner and first-generation college student. Those experiences shaped her understanding of community and inspired a lifelong commitment to helping others.

“I had a first-hand experience of being a refugee student,” Erna shared. “Hartford gave me a home away from home.” Today, she works to strengthen connections between Trinity College and Hartford residents through programs focused on education, community engagement, and immigrant advocacy.

“Erna is deeply committed to CHER, her community, and has a genuine passion for helping others,” said Liliana Polley, Executive Director of CHER. “Her altruistic nature and drive to create positive change made her an easy choice for this nomination.”

If Liliana had to describe Erna in one word, it would be simple: “Courageous.” She recently traveled to Jordan on a humanitarian mission to aid refugees in the Middle East, continuing work inspired by her own family’s experience fleeing Bosnia and surviving the Srebrenica genocide. Over the years, Erna has mentored immigrant and refugee youth, guided students through the college and scholarship process, and participated in advocacy campaigns supporting immigrant justice and human rights.

Much of Erna’s impact happens quietly, through the trust and relationships she builds. One student she mentored years ago still calls her for guidance and support. “I’m not trying to save you,” Erna said. “I’m trying to be there for you.”

At CHER, colleagues often refer to her as the team’s “MVP.” “Erna is the glue for CHER,” Liliana said. “The team could not be successful without her talent, discipline, commitment, and dedication.”

Grounded deeply in her faith and guided by empathy, she approaches every interaction with compassion and humility. For Erna, community is about solidarity, belonging, and uplifting others.





Neighborhood Service Awards



The Neighborhood Service Awards recognize individuals in the community who have made outstanding contributions to Hartford neighborhoods.



Latoya Adgers

Latoya Adgers has spent more than a decade quietly transforming lives at MD Fox Elementary School through compassion, persistence, and an unwavering belief in community. A Hartford native and longtime staff member with The Village for Families & Children, Latoya was nominated for the Neighborhood Service Award by colleagues Yvette Young and Gelda St. Juste, who describe her as “a relentless advocate for the children and families she serves.”

As Site Coordinator and Family Resource Center Coordinator at MD Fox, Latoya’s work reaches far beyond the school day. Her nominators say she consistently goes above and beyond to identify unmet needs and create meaningful solutions for families. When parents began sharing concerns about food

insecurity, Latoya decided the school needed its own pantry. With no budget in place, she partnered with local organizations, connected with Midwest Food Bank, and built a pantry that now supports hundreds of families each year. “She wasn’t just doing the basics,” Yvette says. “She was making sure families had what they needed to survive and thrive.” Gelda adds that Latoya approaches every challenge with determination and heart. “No matter what families are facing, she finds a way to help,” she says. “She never gives up on people.”

For Latoya, the work is deeply personal. Growing up in Hartford, she was inspired by teachers who poured into their students and created opportunities far beyond the classroom. “I realized I didn’t have to be a teacher to have that same type of impact,” she says. “I could do it in a different way.” That philosophy now shapes everything she does—from helping families navigate housing and utility crises to revitalizing the school library with more than 1,000 donated books and creating the “Burr Buddies” mentorship program to help fifth graders transition confidently into middle school.

Her colleagues say what makes Latoya special is not only her leadership, but the way she builds trust. Students stop by her office just to talk, families advocate for her programs, and coworkers rely on her guidance and vision. “It takes a lot of no’s before you get a yes,” Latoya says. “But if I know I’m doing something for somebody else, I want to keep coming back to do that.”

When she learned she would receive the award, Latoya says she was shocked and emotional. “I do the work because it’s in me,” she says. “The South End community deserves it.”





Jorge Hernandez Ovalle

Jorge Hernandez knows firsthand how powerful support and opportunity can be. After joining Our Piece of the Pie (OPP) as a youth participant in 2018, Jorge transformed that experience into a life of service—rising from participant to Youth Ambassador Leader and now serving as a Workforce Development staff member helping Hartford youth build brighter futures. He was nominated for the Neighborhood Service Award by Jose Gonzalez, who described Jorge’s journey as “a true testament to growth, resilience, and community impact.”

At OPP, Jorge works closely with young people ages 16 to 24, connecting them with jobs, certifications, resources, and life skills support. But for Jorge, the work is about much more than employment. “When I see a youth, I want to help them,” he says. “Let’s get you a job. Let’s get you an ID. Let’s connect you to opportunities.” His nominator noted that Jorge’s leadership is rooted in lived experience,

allowing him to deeply connect with youth facing many of the same barriers he once navigated himself.

Jorge says much of his inspiration came from community leaders at OPP who believed in giving back and showed him what service could look like. As a young participant, he watched mentors dedicate themselves to Hartford neighborhoods through cleanups, outreach, and youth programs. “I saw how happy they felt helping people,” Jorge recalls. “And I wanted to do that too.”

Today, he brings that same commitment into every interaction. Jorge shared the story of a young person struggling with domestic violence, instability, and language barriers who dreamed of working in construction. Over the course of a year, Jorge met with him regularly, helped connect him to certifications and resources, and supported him through the process of registering his own business. “Now he officially has his company,” Jorge says proudly. “When I see him, I feel really proud because he was going through so much.”

Whether organizing park cleanups, volunteering with Foodshare, mentoring youth, or simply listening with patience and understanding, Jorge approaches community work with consistency and heart. “I don’t give up really easy with youth,” he says. “Sometimes progress is just showing up to school again—and that matters.”

When Jorge learned he would receive the award, he says he was genuinely surprised. “I was happy inside,” he says. “I didn’t imagine myself getting an award there.” After years of attending the ceremony alongside mentors and coworkers, he never imagined one day standing among the honorees himself.





Pedro Mercado

Pedro Mercado has quietly become one of the driving forces behind some of Hartford's most beloved community traditions. A security officer at Burns Latino Studies Academy, Pedro was nominated for the Neighborhood Service Award by colleague Victor Cristofaro, who says Pedro's impact reaches far beyond the school building. "He's just a servant of the people,"

Victor says. "He does so much for the community, and he does it all without looking for recognition."



Born in Manhattan and raised between Puerto Rico and Hartford, Pedro says helping others has always been part of who he is. "My parents always said that since I was little, I was always looking out for people," he recalls. That spirit eventually led him to co-found the Los Amigos Softball League in 2009, building what began as a small Sunday league into a community tradition that now brings hundreds of families together each season at Colt Park and culminates with championship games at Dunkin' Park. Victor remembers being stunned when he first attended a Los Amigos event. "I thought it was going to be ten guys playing softball," he says. "Instead, it was this huge league. The amount of work and commitment behind it is unbelievable."

Pedro also serves as director of the Hartford Puerto Rican Festival, helping organize cultural events throughout the year, including toy drives, turkey giveaways, pageants, and the Puerto

Rican Day Parade. Inspired by his lifelong hero Roberto Clemente, Pedro sees service as a responsibility. “Everything comes from my heart,” he says. “When you do community service, you don’t expect to get paid. Seeing families smile—that’s what you look for.”

What stands out most to those around him is the way he works behind the scenes. Victor describes seeing Pedro stay late after school helping young contestants practice speeches and dances for local cultural pageants, quietly mentoring students and building their confidence. “He stands at a distance and lets them grow,” Victor says. “He’s not trying to be the center of attention—he wants them to shine.”

Pedro’s dedication often continues long after most people have gone home. Following Hurricane Maria in 2017, he quickly organized a large-scale community fundraiser, collecting thousands of pounds of clothing and supplies for families arriving in Hartford and eventually helping send seven shipping containers of aid to Puerto Rico. Victor also recalls Pedro showing him videos of volunteers working late into the night after heavy rain, using car headlights to clear flooded fields so league games could continue the next day. “Time is the most valuable thing people can give,” Victor says. “And Pedro gives so much of it.”

Despite everything he does, Pedro remains humble and deeply rooted in service. “Community means everything,” he says. “It’s about working together and supporting each other.” Through sports, culture, mentorship, and countless unseen acts of generosity, Pedro Mercado continues to create spaces where Hartford residents feel connected, celebrated, and proud of their city.





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Special thanks to Liberty Bank for supporting
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*REACH is a SINA initiative
supported by its member institutions:*
Connecticut Children's Medical Center,
Trinity College,
and Hartford Hospital

The REACH Committee's mission is to develop, support
and recognize individuals who positively contribute to
the growth of the Hartford Community.



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