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Autism Society of America Announces 2015 Award Winners

Recognition Highlights Excellence in the Field of Autism

Bethesda, Md. (June 29, 2015) – The Autism Society today announced the winners for the [2015 Autism Society Awards](#). The awards recognize exceptional contributions of individuals and organizations that help improve the lives of the several thousand people living with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States and across the globe.

“Each year we are honored to recognize individuals and organizations that have demonstrated the highest in compassion and dedication to all impacted by autism,” said Scott Badesch, Autism Society President/CEO. “This year is no different. The 2015 award winners represent the best in volunteerism, philanthropy, advocacy, research and education our community has to offer.”

The 2015 Autism Society Award winners were each nominated by members of the autism community and voted on by the Autism Society Awards selection committee. This year’s winners include:

Volunteer of the Year – *Ann Hart*

As board president of the [Autism Society of Central Texas](#) and member of the Texas Council on Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Ann Hart has given time and resources helping people with ASD. The thirty year autism advocate is the mother of an adult son with autism.

Audrey I. Horne Memorial Award - *Tracy White*

Tracy White’s passion for autism advocacy led to her graduation from Partners in Policy Making and a position with the West Virginia Parent Training and Information Center as a parent trainer. She holds two board positions Cross Lanes Community Development and Healthy Cross Lanes and volunteers with the [Autism Society of West Virginia](#).

Dr. Temple Grandin Outstanding Literary Work of the Year – (tie) *Exceptionally Good Friends* by Melissa K. Burkhardt; *Decoding Dating* by John Miller

Melissa Burkhardt’s critically acclaimed children’s novel presents the story of two young people, one with autism and one typically developing, and their journey toward awareness and understanding. *Decoding Dating* is a social and romantic relationship how-to guide for adults on the autism spectrum and loved ones.

Dr. Cathy Pratt Autism Professional of the Year – *Sharon Francis*

For the past 10 years, Sharon Francis has served as founder and director of the [Channel Island Social Services \(CISS\)](#), a respite care program based in Ventura County, California. As a member of the [Autism](#)

[Society Ventura County \(ASVC\)](#) Board of Directors, Sharon has donated thousands in in-kind services and helped raise over \$100,000 for ASVC as race director for the annual ASVC Autism Run.

Outstanding Advocate of the Year – *Connor Cummings*

Connor Cummings is the namesake and face of Conner’s Law, a Virginia legislation that allows single parents of adults with special needs to receive child support. Through Connor's efforts, the bill passed and received bipartisan support in both the Virginia House of Representatives and Senate.

Adam Heavner Memorial Award for Employer of the Year – *Autistic Global Initiative*

[Autistic Global Initiative](#), a program of the [Autism Research Institute](#), empowers adults with autism to seek gainful employment opportunities and lead successful lives. The advisory group comprises of a cross-section of professionals who work exclusively with adults on the spectrum to give them the tools necessary to thrive in all aspects of daily life.

Outstanding Research of the Year – *Oliver Wendt, Ph.D.*

A [Purdue University](#) professor in the [Department of Speech, Language and Hearing Sciences](#), [Dr. Wendt](#) spearheads a wide variety of research initiatives geared toward augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) interventions to enhance language skills of nonverbal children with autism. His research has led to the creation of two AAC therapy apps, [SPEAKall](#) and [SPEAKmore](#)!

Affiliate of the Year - *Autism Society Heartland*

The [Autism Society Heartland](#) co-produced a groundbreaking documentary entitled, [Just Like You - Autism](#), which told the story of three adolescents on the spectrum seeking to gain acceptance and understanding from neurotypical peers. The Kansas-based affiliate answers the call for families and individuals impacted by autism every day.

Outstanding Service – *Johnny Carino’s Italian Restaurants*

[Johnny Carino's](#) Italian Restaurants donated \$40,000 to the Autism Society to help provide resources and supports for individuals and families impacted by ASD. For National Autism Awareness Month, Carino’s celebrated the artwork of people with autism to promote appreciation and awareness. Carino’s continues to champion for autism awareness and has raised over \$300,000 for the autism community.

The 2015 Autism Society Awards will be given out at the 46th Annual Autism Society National Conference and Exposition in Denver, Colorado, July 8 - 11, 2015. For more information about the Autism Society Awards, visit www.autism-society.org.

About the Autism Society

The Autism Society is a national source of information, advocacy and support that reaches local autism communities offering a one-of-a-kind nationwide network of autism knowledge and support. An organization with 50 years of heritage and heart, the Autism Society is dedicated to providing a trustworthy, respectful and caring network of people that truly impacts the lives of individuals on the spectrum. For more information, visit www.autism-society.org.