

ANNOUNCING THE 2022 SHINE THE LIGHT AWARD WINNERS



The Touchstone Energy® Cooperatives of Iowa are driven by a commitment to community. To celebrate local volunteers, the Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives held its second annual Shine the Light contest earlier this summer. Employees and member-consumers of Iowa's locally owned electric cooperatives were invited to nominate someone who makes a positive difference in their community.

The judging committee had the difficult task of selecting three contest winners from 68 outstanding nominees.

Congratulations to **Deb Johnson**, who is recognized for her enthusiastic support of the Greater Fairfield Area Habitat for Humanity; **Sharon Van Beek**, who is recognized for her generous commitment to Buckets of Joy; and **Nicole Low**, who is recognized for her vision in establishing Eldora's Community Garden. These three winners have been awarded a \$2,000 donation to their charity.

The following pages showcase and honor each of the Shine the Light contest winners' commitment to humbly serving their communities. Learn more at www.iowaShineTheLight.com.



Kevin Wheeler, CEO/general manager of Access Energy Cooperative, presents a check to Deb Johnson (center), with the Greater Fairfield Area Habitat for Humanity. Also pictured is Kathy Brown, who nominated Johnson for the award.

GREATER FAIRFIELD AREA HABITAT FOR HUMANITY DEB JOHNSON ASSISTS LOCAL FAMILIES WITH STABLE HOUSING

At just 5 feet tall, Deb Johnson's commitment to her community is anything but small. A lifelong resident of Fairfield in southeast Iowa, Johnson was nominated for the 2022 Shine the Light contest for her volunteer work with the Greater Fairfield Area Habitat for Humanity.

Johnson was nominated by her friend and fellow Habitat volunteer Kathy Brown.

"Deb has always been a voice for the less fortunate, helping the Habitat board be true to our mission of building safe and decent homes for families,"

Brown says. "Her heart is filled with love and compassion for others, especially children."

The two first worked together years ago when Brown was a schoolteacher and Johnson served as a social worker. A friendship soon blossomed, and their families grew up together.

Johnson serves on the local Habitat for Humanity board and volunteers as the homeowner support chair. She uses her social work experience to serve as a liaison between each Habitat partner family and the Habitat board during construction.



Deb Johnson helps Fairfield families in need.

As a big believer in providing safe, stable housing for families, Johnson devotes many hours to coordinating work schedules and encouraging the construction team. A gifted cook, Johnson lifts the spirits of the Fairfield High School students working with Habitat by bringing cookies and treats on Fridays during builds.

“The students loved her and would cheer when she drove up at the end of the week. She quickly became known as the ‘Cookie Lady,’” Brown shares.

Johnson also serves on the local Habitat for Humanity ReStore board, which sells gently used furniture and furnishings that have been donated. Money made at the ReStore is then used to fund housing construction for the Greater Fairfield Area Habitat for Humanity.

“The most rewarding part of serving with Habitat for Humanity is when we dedicate the house to the partner family. It’s just wonderful,” says Johnson. “Habitat for Humanity gives families a hand up, not a handout.”

Brown says the \$2,000 Shine the Light donation could likely be used to purchase tools volunteers can use for future construction projects. Brown also wants others to know that Johnson has a kind heart and is a compassionate person.

“She’s a goer and a giver in addition to being a devoted mother and grandmother. She certainly deserves this recognition,” says Brown.

When asked if she has words to live by, Johnson says volunteering and serving are important and rewarding.

“You get a lot more back than what you give. Growing up, my parents encouraged community service and involvement, so it has always been a part of my life to do things for other people,” Johnson shares.

Article contributed by Erin Campbell, Iowa Association of Electric Cooperatives.



BUCKETS OF JOY SHARON VAN BEEK'S TRADITION FILLS HEARTS

Through Buckets of Joy, Sharon Van Beek helps to bring a joyous Christmas to northwest Iowa children.

The tradition of giving has been passed through the Van Beek family for generations. For 40 years, they have been filling “Buckets of Joy” for children to celebrate that tradition in the Christmas season.

When reading about the Shine the Light contest, North West Rural Electric Cooperative member Laura Leonard instantly thought of her mom Sharon Van Beek of Primghar. “She has selflessly done so much work for the program since she has taken it over and is always working hard to shop sales to find the best deals that can serve the most kids. She has put countless hours into the program; Sharon is one of the most selfless people I know.”

Sharon has been working with the program for over 30 years. Initially started by her in-laws, Chris and Verna Van Beek, the program began as a way to distribute government food commodities to families in need. Their experiences moved them to do something special for struggling families with young children. The Buckets of Joy project launched in 1982 when the couple filled 25 empty ice cream buckets with basic clothing and a toy for the children. The project quickly grew, and within five years, they were filling and distributing 10 times the number of buckets filled at the program’s beginning.

When health issues took a toll on the farming couple, Sharon and her husband Jon stepped up and committed to continuing the project. By this time, buckets had become bags, but the name and the gifts remained. Today, each sack is stuffed with a footed blanket sleeper or sweatshirt, socks, stocking cap, mittens, crackers, toothbrush, colors, coloring book and a book telling the Nativity story.

Although technically a Christmas project, work continues year-round. Sharon, a retired teacher and the program’s primary shopper, takes inventory each January and shops sales and special offers throughout the year for supplies.

Local churches, banks and individuals answer the call to help buy needed supplies. “Each bucket averages about \$40, and that’s with finding things on sale,” explains Sharon. “Annually, we fill 150-250 buckets depending on the need.”

Buckets of Joy are distributed to children ages 0-5 through the WIC program and, more recently, through Upper Des Moines and the Department of Human Services, as well as Head Start programs in O’Brien County. Buckets help to bring a joyous Christmas for the children receiving the gifts. There is also a special feeling of happiness for Sharon, Jon and all those assisting with the project, knowing they have helped make someone else’s Christmas a bit brighter.

Article contributed by Emily Vander Velde from North West Rural Electric Cooperative.



Lyle Korver, CEO of North West REC, presents a check to Van Beek.

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