

NAI Region 2 Chesapeake Awards 2023

The Outstanding Interpretive Awards for 2023 were presented during the Chesapeake Region 2 Workshop at Chincoteague Field Station in March. Six awards were presented as follows:



Melissa Acuti Boyle—Outstanding Interpretive Manager

In her current role as Chief of Interpretation for the Maryland Park Service, Melissa Acuti Boyle works statewide, leading 76 parks in their interpretive endeavors. She supports a vast array of programs at these parks including Junior and Senior Ranger programs, Create Your Own State Park, Es Mi Parque and many more. Melissa has the significant challenge of training new and seasonal staff in best interpretive practices multiple times a year. She actively mentors younger employees and individuals. Recently Melissa helped to see the completion of the Sandy Point State Park Nature Center which focuses on the interconnection and diversity of the Chesapeake Watershed. The first bilingual nature center in a Maryland State Park, this was a huge undertaking and involved many partner agencies throughout the process. Melissa Acuti Boyle is a brilliant, compassionate and innovative interpretive program manager.



Jennifer Simms—Outstanding Frontline Interpreter

Jennifer Simms has worked in the field of environmental education and interpretation for over 15 years. As a Principal Park Naturalist for Montgomery Parks in Maryland, she uses her vast knowledge of natural history to conduct programs for a wide range of audiences, engaging them in nature and weaving a conservation message into the programs. A Certified Interpretive Guide, Jennifer reaches out to a diverse public. She is fluent in American Sign Language and presents nature programs to the deaf and hard of hearing. This past summer she conducted a camp for children of all abilities, considering the needs of the individual participants while training the staff and preparing the site for a positive experience. She is also Meadowside Nature Center’s Social Media Interpreter, creating content that connects audiences with the Center’s ambassador animals and highlights program opportunities. Jennifer Simms uses her knowledge of natural history to create excellent programming and make connections with a wide variety of audiences in a number of different ways.



Jacob van Schilgaarde—Outstanding Part-time Interpreter

Jacob van Schilgaarde is an instructor at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, part of Loudoun County Parks, Recreation and Community Services in Virginia. He has a Bachelor of Science degree in Conservation Biology, a Virginia Master Naturalist Certification and experience leading wildlife education programs. During the Covid pandemic, Jake developed interpretive programs that were exclusively held outdoors, including Owling at the Moon, Birding for Beginners and Full Moon Hikes. He has expanded the Full Moon Hikes to include a power point presentation about the wildlife they might encounter and their nighttime noises, added a cultural theme to the hikes using traditional names such as Cold Moon, Strawberry Moon, etc., with the story about those names and used modern technology, bionic ears, to amplify the nature sounds. Additionally, Jake developed a Junior Naturalist activity which consists of four booklets of various themes related to the natural and historical resources found at the Preserve. Jake leads a variety of programs for different ages, making participants feel comfortable by sharing his infectious passion for nature.



Doreen Widney—Outstanding Interpretive Volunteer

Doreen Widney is a member of the Friends of Smith Mountain Lake State Park in Virginia. She has volunteered over 4000 hours at the Park. She always goes above and beyond what is expected of her and puts the well-being of the Park guests at the forefront of her duties. Doreen has served as the boat tour coordinator for the free pontoon boat guided tours on Smith Mountain Lake, organizing volunteer captains and PDF assistants. She took it upon herself to develop procedures that enhanced boat tour operations. Doreen is always willing to assist with interpretive programs, including Full Moon boat tours, special events such as summer music concerts and school field trips. She is often the first volunteer to arrive and the last to leave. She has delighted guests, both young and old, as Sunny Bunny at the Park's Easter event. On multiple occasions she has provided home cooked meals for the members of the Park's Youth Conservation Corps. Doreen Widney is one of Smith Mountain Lake State Park's most valued and dedicated volunteers.



Ken Rosenthal—Meritorious Service Award

Ken Rosenthal moved to Virginia in 2010 where he became an Interpreter at Arlington County Virginia Parks. He had been active in NAI Region 4 before his move and reached out to the leadership of this region to become a participating member here. Ken has said he likes to be involved because it gives him a better sense of place and a deeper understanding of the organization. Ken served on the Region 2 board for five years as treasurer. He did a great job keeping track of the Region's money and helping other members get reimbursed by national NAI for money spent on the organization's behalf. Ken has presented at many regional workshops, sharing his expertise about the natural world. More than once, he volunteered at the last minute to present a session in place of someone who had to drop out. He has made a point of nominating deserving colleagues for outstanding interpretive awards. And in 2018, Ken was recognized for his excellent work as a Park Naturalist with the Outstanding Frontline Interpreter Award.



Yvonne Johnson—Special Appreciation Award

Yvonne Johnson has led NAI Region 2 as Assistant Director and Director for over six years. She has brought unflagging energy and dedication to the job. Yvonne dove into the administrative tasks, working with both NAI National staff and the Regional board to bring the best opportunities and information to the members. She has done an amazing job in encouraging the board and other members to participate fully and do their best. Yvonne has fostered exciting, educational and fun workshops during her terms. She received a Meritorious Service Award in 2018 for her work as Assistant Director. And although Yvonne's Director's term ended in December, when the new Director was unable to attend this workshop, she stepped up with her wonderful positive personality and her can-do spirit to help bring off this excellent workshop. Yvonne did a tremendous job handling of the difficult times caused by the Corona virus, from dealing with the cancellation of the March 2020 Workshop to transitioning to online activities including the 2022 Workshop. Yvonne has touched the lives of the Chesapeake Region members and helped them become better interpreters, sharing their love of nature and history with their communities.