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(Elyria, Ohio) **Leadership Lorain County**, a premier organization for leadership development in the county, is excited to kick-off its 40th Anniversary year by commemorating the exceptional community activism of the 2024 Difference Maker Award honorees at the forthcoming **Difference Makers Gala** on Friday, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 2024. This event will pay homage to four individuals and an organization for their outstanding leadership and profound impact in the Lorain County community and beyond. In total, over 45 nominations were submitted for this year's ceremony to Leadership Lorain County.

The Difference Maker selection committee, comprising four distinguished Lorain County community members, two dedicated LLC Board members, and esteemed LLC President & CEO, diligently undertook an extensive review process for each of the nominations. The honorees, chosen to represent a group of individuals and an organization who have demonstrated remarkable leadership qualities and have made a significant impact on the community.

Leadership Lorain County eagerly anticipates celebrating this year's remarkable cohort of **Difference Makers** with you, underscoring the sentiment that *There's No Place Like Lorain County*. We invite you to join us in commemorating this year's honorees.

Please help us in celebrating this year's honorees as follows:

The 2024 Difference Makers are:

**Eric Nord Award for Excellence in Leadership**

**Gayle A. Reeves, Esq.**

*Partner*

*Dooley Gembala McLaughlin & Pecora*

**Excellence in Leadership Award**

**Dr. Mark A. Ballard**

*CEO, WNZN Power 89.1 FM Radio;  
Lorain City Schools Board of Education*

**Excellence in Leadership Award**

**James Vandemark**

*Owner  
Vandemark Jewelers*

**Emerald Award for Inspirational Leadership**

**Christopher Cocco**

*Senior Designer  
Clark & Post Architects Inc.*

**Excellence in Leadership Award Organization**

**Sheffield-Sheffield Lake City School District  
Student Services Team**

**Gayle A. Reeves, Esq.**

Gayle A. Reeves has been a visionary, innovator, & servant-leader in Lorain County (LC) for over 40yrs. Gayle started her private practice in Elder Law when there were very few female attorneys in LC, & even fewer who practiced in the Estate Planning & Probate area. When Long-Term Care Planning became a new area of practice, Gayle was one of the first attorneys to embrace it.

She personally experienced the overwhelming feeling of having to move her father to a nursing home & caring for her mother when she moved in with Gayle & her husband, Mark. She understands the humbling experience of standing in line at the Medicaid office, being treated as a nonentity. Her heart was changed, & she committed herself to helping others navigate the complicated world of long-term care planning. Gayle provides exceptional counsel to individuals & families with her elder care practice. She truly cares about her clients & her compassion comes through, giving them understanding, & hope.

Gayle has served on the Elder Law Committee of the Ohio State Bar Association, the Probate Committee of the Lorain County Bar Association, & the International Committee of the National Academy of Elder Law Attorneys. Gayle has travelled all over the world with a delegation to learn unique solutions adopted by other countries to manage the legal challenges facing the elderly.

She has used her successful, professional platform to help the LC legal community every step of the way. She sat on the LCBA's Executive Board for 10yrs. serving as President in 2006-2007. She has sat on the LCBA Legal Ethics & Grievance Committee & served as that Board's Chair. Gayle also served as a mentor for female attorneys entering the field in the LC legal community during a time when there were very few females that practiced probate law. She continues to be sought out by her peers when they have elder law questions, regularly presented for the LCBA's continuing education series, & conducted character & fitness interviews of Ohio Bar applicants.

After a long, successful solo practice, Gayle joined the firm of Dooley Gembala McLaughlin & Pecora as a partner, ensuring continued excellent representation for her clients after she retired. Capping off her professional career, Gayle received the LCBA's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2023 & was honored at the LCBA's 100th Anniversary Gala.

Gayle's desire to help others is not limited to the legal arena. She worked in partnership with local school districts to promote student success & connected many school systems to services & partnerships with non-profits. Gayle has spent her entire career giving back to our community by serving on many non-profit boards. She served on the Board of the Epilepsy Foundation, Board of the Community Foundation of Lorain County & is a past Chair of that Board. During her tenure on the CFLC Board, Gayle & Brian Frederick created the Board Chair network to elevate the effectiveness of all non-profit boards in LC. Gayle also sat on and chaired the Board for Second Harvest Food Bank. Gayle co-chaired a very successful capital campaign that raised \$5.1 million to fund a new food distribution center. She plans to continue to promote the SHFB's mission in new & innovative ways.

As Gayle begins to wind down her practice, she continues to promote the importance of volunteerism by leading a new generation of attorneys through regular activities between her firm & SHFB. She has demonstrated her dedication to improving LC for countless years & in many ways. Gayle has always led with her heart & moved forward with purpose, courage, & enthusiasm to support innovative ideas & goals that raise dignity for individuals & communities throughout our area.

### **Dr. Mark A. Ballard**

Born and raised in Lorain, Ohio, Dr. Mark A. Ballard is the quiet force behind many of the social services and initiatives that ensure Lorain County is a great place to live, learn and work. His time and voice have contributed to the development of policy, programming and support benefiting public schools, law enforcement, faith-based organizations, healthcare,

environment, politics and perhaps most significantly, our children and families. Some of his many affiliations include:

CEO, WNZN Power 89.1 FM Radio  
Member and Past President, Lorain City Schools Board of Education  
Chaplain, Lorain Police Department  
Executive Board, Northeast Ohio Boys and Girls Club  
Trustee, Greater Victory Ministries  
Member, Mercy Health Diversity and Inclusion Board  
Member, City of Lorain Sewer Water Advisory Board  
Executive Committee, Lorain County Democratic Party  
Founder, 100 Men of Lorain County  
Founder, PACE Foundation  
President, Lorain County Association of Black School Educators

While the projects he leads are wide ranging, the common thread of his work is rooted in servant leadership, and his Christian faith. For example, when the economy took a downturn in the early 2000's, Mark founded the PACE Foundation, a 501(c)(3) which focuses on Youth Development, Job Training and Workforce Development, and Economic Development Projects. When gang violence disrupted our communities in the early 2010's, he founded 100 Men of Lorain County, connecting male mentors with at-risk juveniles to develop their respect for family, spirituality, justice, and integrity.

Significantly, Mark served as President of the Lorain City Schools Board of Education during their fight to remove the district from Academic Distress as a result of House Bill 70 which had been locally perceived as the biggest long-term threat to the Lorain community. Mark made sure the City of Lorain and the struggles of underserved populations were front-and-center both locally and down in Columbus. Working with local legislators, community leaders, media partners, educators and families, those efforts led to Lorain being the only district of three under state oversight to be released by Governor Mike DeWine earlier this year.

For all his professional and political accomplishments, Mark will humbly describe himself as "just a kid from Lorain" and a "family man." He and his wife Sandra have life-long ties to the City of Lorain, and both graduated from Lorain High School in 1986. They have two children, Mark Anthony, and Moriah Alyssa, who graduated from Lorain High in 2012 and 2015, respectively.

**James (Jim) Vandemark:**

Jim started his career in Jewelry in 1981 at Brandau Jewelers in Elyria at the age of 16. He graduated from Elyria High School in 1983 and continued working at Brandau Jewelers, obtaining his certification from the Gemological Institute of America, being certified in diamonds and diamond grading. In October of 2002, Jim opened Vandemark Jewelers, making this year their 23rd year in business. Jim is beyond thankful for the support of the community, which is why he loves to give back.

Jim's dedication to community service started with the Elyria Jaycee's where he was President from 1990 to 1991, establishing the Elyria Jaycee's scholarship fund. He was involved with Elyria Noon Kiwanis for 25 years, running their annual Halloween parade for 15 years. Jim served on the boards of the Elyria Downtown Commons group, reorganized as Main Street Elyria for over 25 years. He was board chair for three years to end his tenure. Jim has been on the Elyria City Schools Endowment board since 1996, co-chairing the annual golf outing. He has also co-chaired two school levy campaigns for Elyria City Schools. Jim was a past board member for the Lorain County Historical Society. He also was a past member of Sales and Marketing Executives of Lorain County, serving as president from 2001 to 2002.

He currently serves on the board for the Elyria Apple Festival, helping coordinate the car show and is the emcee for the Century Club dinner, raising funds for the festival. He served on the Community Foundation of Lorain County's board from 2008 to 2015, was Board Chair in 2014 and remains involved on the grants committee. Jim is also involved with the Elyria Public Library Endowment Board, serving as President from 2020 to 2022. Jim currently is a member of Elyria noon Rotary and a trustee of the Ely trust.

Giving back to the community that has always supported him is a priority for Jim and his family.

**Christopher Cocco:**

Christopher Cocco has always felt a strong connection to place. His first job at The Lorain Palace Theatre would cultivate a lasting bond to Downtown Lorain and its nearby waterfront. These formative experiences as a youth would instill core Lorain values of celebrating diversity, loyalty, and community.

Christopher is a graduate of The Ohio State University Department of Design where he received his Bachelor of Science in Design. At Ohio State, Christopher became interested in the human-centered approach to design and how improved interactions and experiences between humans, spaces, and objects have profound impact on lives and society.

Looking for a directional shift in his late 20's, mentors shared their experiences with service life for a way to find meaning, fulfillment, and community in his life. Service opportunities opened

new doors and presented in ways that could empower and transform the people and place he formed a strong connection to as a youth.

In 2019, Christopher was part of a group at the Lorain Historical Society that formed Main Street Lorain and over the last 4 years has been grateful for the opportunity to serve as the board's Vice President and President over that time. Main Street Lorain continues to build a strong foundation toward the revitalization of Downtown Lorain and Christopher is #LorainProud to have played a small part of bringing vitality to Lorain's Historic Commercial District.

Christopher's professional work has also aligned with his vocations for service and social impact. Clark & Post Architects, Inc. has a proud history of working with the non-profit sector in Lorain County. Christopher has been fortunate to work on projects for many great organizations to help increase their capacity and meet community needs. Over his 10 years at Clark and Post, Christopher has worked on projects with the Lorain Historical Society, Neighborhood Alliance, United Way of Greater Lorain County, Road to Hope, Blessing House, Oberlin Community Services, and Second Harvest Food Bank.

When looking for diversion, Christopher enjoys making pizza with his wife Alison, finding beach glass along Lake Erie, listening to a good record, and still kicking the soccer ball around.

### **Sheffield-Sheffield Lake City School District Student Services Team**

The Student Services Team of the Sheffield-Sheffield Lake City Schools provides a wide continuum of behavioral health and social-emotional learning support for the communities of Sheffield Village and the City of Sheffield Lake. Integrated support is provided through the collaboration of a District Social Worker, Family Engagement Specialist, and five School Counselors. The team works to provide universal, targeted, and intensive support by identifying gaps in service and environmental barriers which impede student learning.

The Student Services Team engages in work that significantly impacts not only the students in their district, but also families throughout Lorain County. Projects include addressing immediate needs such as food insecurity, housing, and clothing, as well as educational tools, training, and information nights for parents, grandparents, and other kinship caregivers. Wraparound support provided by the district includes a mobile food pantry initiated in 2019 through a partnership with Second Harvest Food Bank of North Central Ohio. This mobile food pantry, which was one of four county distributions initiated during the onset of the pandemic, continues to serve over 400 families per month. Available to residents of Lorain County, its service has reached over 6,000 families and over 21,000 unique individuals since inception. As an extension of outreach, the team coordinates grant-funded literacy and resiliency kits, which

are geared to increase adult-child interactions by providing kitchen and other family-oriented activities via hands-on learning experiences.

Wraparound support also includes a locally developed clothing 'store' and community clothing/shoe distributions, so that students can confidently come to school in clean, fitting clothes, as well as have access to hygiene and laundry services in effort to strengthen student learning. Additionally, vaccination clinics at no cost to the community help keep our communities and schools healthy and safe.

The team recognizes that it is necessary to partner with community and faith-based partners to connect the community with integrated whole-child support. As part of a comprehensive approach to a continuum of care, the team works closely with a variety of community partners, including Second Harvest Food Bank, SoulToSole, Santa's Little Helpers, Sheffield Village Lions Club, area churches, pharmacies, community mental health agencies, behavioral health private practices, and the Good Knights of Lorain County.

A culture of student volunteerism has been established where students serve as the majority volunteer workforce in these outreach service projects. Students participating earn community service credit through a variety of school service organizations, including a locally awarded diploma distinction for volunteerism highlighted at the 50-, 100- and 200-hour service levels. Through integrated support and social-emotional learning opportunities, the district continually works to showcase the Sheffield-Sheffield Lake City Schools as a progressive, community-focused learning center.

### **More About the Difference Makers Gala**

More information on each of the 2024 Difference Makers honorees, sponsorship opportunities, and 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary events, can be found on the Leadership Lorain County website at [www.leadershiploraincounty.com](http://www.leadershiploraincounty.com) or like our Facebook page [facebook.com/leadershiploraincounty](https://facebook.com/leadershiploraincounty).

### **About Leadership Lorain County**

Leadership Lorain County has been proudly implementing its mission to develop and advance leaders who support the growth and diversity of our county by directing initiatives to connect the people, government, academia, and businesses of Lorain County for 40 years. Through this mission, Leadership strives to be the primary resource to connect the hearts of business, education, and philanthropy throughout our region. We are dedicated to developing life-long leaders, passionate about improving the vitality of the county, able to lead initiatives within the dynamics of our community, all while helping their own organizations become a valued partner in the resurgence of Lorain County.

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