

THE LEROY COLLINS

# Distinguished

ALUMNI AWARDS 2021

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Communications and  
Marketing Commission

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ASSOCIATION OF FLORIDA COLLEGES  
COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING COMMISSION



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THE LEROY COLLINS

# 2021 Distinguished Alumni Awards



The 28 colleges within the Florida College System provide a sturdy bridge of opportunity for more than 21 million residents of the state to fully develop their individual talents and abilities. The alumni of the Florida College System impact our lives daily, enriching us through their accomplishments. They enhance their respective professions and set positive examples for future students.

In 1990, the Florida Association of Community Colleges and the State Board of Community Colleges developed the Distinguished Community College Alumni Awards to recognize the many significant contributions of Florida's community colleges and their graduates. The award is named after Governor LeRoy Collins to acknowledge his contributions to Florida's community colleges.

Throughout the years since its creation, the LeRoy Collins awards have been given to representatives from each of the five regions in Florida and to one honorary recipient. These recipients received their recognitions at the Presidential Banquet at the Florida Association of Community Colleges' Annual Convention.

In early 2007, the awards were restructured to honor the diversity of achievement represented by college alumni. Each college receives an invitation to nominate an alumni from only one of the following categories: Lifetime Achievement, Rising Star, Hometown Hero, and Against the Odds. The nominees and award winners will be recognized during the virtual 2021 LeRoy Collins Awards program. Award winners will receive a crystal obelisk emblematic of the award, and other nominees will receive a medallion.

TO ALL OF THE 2021 LEROY COLLINS DISTINGUISHED ALUMNI  
AWARDS NOMINEES AND RECIPIENTS,

# Congratulations!

THE LEROY COLLINS

# Lifetime Achievement Award

Presented to the Florida college alumnus who has reached state, regional or national recognition.  
The recipient represents the highest level of achievement in his or her field.



## Florida Supreme Court Justice Ricky Polson

*Chipola College*



Ricky Polston, Florida Supreme Court Justice, is Chipola College's 2021 Alumnus of the Year.

Polston grew up on a farm in the small Panhandle town of Graceville, where his family raised peanuts, watermelon and cattle. He graduated from Chipola in 1975 with an Associate in Arts. He says, "I will always be grateful for the opportunity to attend Chipola and for the excellent foundational education that I received there. The professors took a personal interest in us and genuinely cared. On a personal level, I had great fun meeting new lifelong friends and continuing with others from my hometown. I could not have asked for a better experience in my first two years of college."

Polston has returned to Chipola in recent years to offer advice to students in the college's honors program.

Polston went on to earn a Bachelor of Science at Florida State University, where he was named FSU's Most Outstanding

Accounting Student and was inducted into the Beta Alpha Psi Honorary Accounting Society. Upon graduation, he became a CPA and practiced accounting with Deloitte Haskins & Sells in the Tampa office for seven years. He then returned to FSU for his law degree. Although no longer practicing accounting, he

remains a CPA and is a member of the Florida Institute of CPAs and American Institute of CPAs.

In 1986, Polston obtained a Juris Doctor degree with high honors from Florida State University College of Law. He was a member of the FSU Law Review and the Order of the Coif. After becoming a member of the Florida Bar, he worked in private law practice for 14 years primarily in commercial litigation and was a certified circuit court mediator. He received a Martindale-Hubbell AV rating and was included in the Bar Register Preeminent Attorneys. He was a member of the Tallahassee Bar Association and Tallahassee Inn of Court (former treasurer). He was admitted to practice before the U.S. District Court, Northern District of Florida; U.S. District Court, Middle District of Florida; U.S. District Court, Southern District of Florida; U.S. Tax Court; U.S. Court of Appeals, Eleventh Circuit; U.S. Court of Federal Claims; U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit and the U.S. Supreme Court.

Polston became a judge at the Florida First District Court of Appeal in 2001 until becoming a justice of the Florida Supreme Court in 2008. During this time, he served a two-year term as chief justice of the Florida Supreme Court (2012-2014), served as administrative justice for many terms, and has been on numerous Bar and court committees and as a liaison to them. Since 2003, he has been an adjunct professor at the FSU College of Law, teaching various courses including Florida Constitutional Law, Insurance Law, and Alternative Dispute Resolution.

Polston and his wife, Deborah Ehler Polston, have been married 44 years, have 10 children, including an adopted sibling group of six, and numerous grandchildren. He has been involved in his church, including being an elder, deacon, and teacher of various student and adult classes.

## LeRoy Collins Distinguished Alumni 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award Nominee

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### Dominic M. Calabro

*Broward College*

Dominic M. Calabro has led Florida TaxWatch as president and CEO for nearly its entire 41-year existence, after joining its research staff in 1980. Under his leadership, Florida TaxWatch has earned and maintained the credibility and respect of Florida's most highly regarded and influential leaders, its citizens, as well as the highly independent state and national media.

THE LEROY COLLINS

# Against the Odds Award

Presented to the Florida college alumna who has achieved despite financial, sociological or physical adversity.  
Recipients are alumni for whom the college experience has had the most direct and positive effect.



Sabby Hightower  
*Indian River State College*



Loving mother, devoted daughter, dedicated student, engaging leader, and enthusiastic volunteer — these are just a few words you could use to describe Indian River State College graduate Sabby Hightower, Master of Health Administration. Those who know her personal story would add survivor, exemplar and champion.

After an undergraduate career filled with personal loss, challenges, and what for others could have been unsurmountable obstacles, Hightower graduated from IRSC in May 2019 with a Bachelor of Science Degree in Healthcare Management. Staying focused on her educational goals, she immediately entered the Executive Master of Health Administration, Health/Healthcare Administration Management program at Florida Atlantic University, graduating in 2020. Before embarking on doctoral studies at Saybrook University, Hightower returned to IRSC for a Technical Certificate in Entrepreneurship in the Spring of 2021. She expects to

complete a Ph.D. in Mind-Body Medicine: Specialization in Integrative Wellness Coaching in 2025.

Throughout her career at IRSC, Hightower earned many honors. In addition to excelling in her studies — evidenced by securing two gold medals at the statewide Health Occupation Students of America leadership conference — Hightower was highly active in campus life. She served as vice president and parliamentarian of the Campus Coalition Government; served as a board member with the IRSC Collegiate DECA and



HOSA chapters; participated in the IRSC Emerging Leaders Program; served as peer mentor and educator in the Women of Color and Legacy Leaders programs; and welcomed prospective students as a student ambassador.

Hightower earned leadership, service and academic awards from Collegiate International DECA and was named CCG Representative of the Year in 2017. Such accomplishment has truly come “against all odds.”

Hightower’s father passed away in 2016 after suffering a series of strokes. With four small children to care for, she and her husband began looking after Hightower’s mother, a paraplegic with severe health issues. In March 2017, Hightower’s husband went into sudden cardiac arrest and was rushed to the hospital, where he was pronounced dead. After the passing of her husband, Hightower and her children moved into her mother’s home. In November 2018, a blaze destroyed that home. Thankfully, the family escaped unharmed.

Hightower credits her IRSC family with helping her stay the course. “With the loss of a couple of loved ones in my family, I needed the community of IRSC to grab hold of my hand to keep me strong and motivated, and for that reason, I was able to prevail,” she shares.

Hightower’s steadfast commitment to education, leadership and volunteerism continues today. She is chair-elect of the LPC East Florida 2021 / American College of Healthcare Executives; Corporate Compliance & FQHC Accreditation Leader for Treasure Coast Community Health; mentor to HOSA members and officers at IRSC; and is a volunteer caregiver concierge at VNA of the Treasure Coast.

Hightower is a role model for her children and her peers alike. Her perseverance embodies the spirit of IRSC students past and present.

## LeRoy Collins Distinguished Alumni 2021 Against the Odds Award Nominees

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**Cameron Northup Delgado**

*Pensacola State College*

Cameron Northup Delgado is a state-licensed esthetician who earned a Career Technical Certificate from Pensacola State College’s Facials Specialty Program. She is the first person with Down syndrome in Florida to earn the certification. Today she works at a wellness spa. Delgado never imagined she would attend college and offers high praise to PSC for making her dreams a reality.



**Thomas Giella Jr.**

*Pasco-Hernando State College*

Despite being told that college would not be an option for him, Giella continued to overcome obstacles put before him and earned degrees from Pasco-Hernando State College and St. Leo University. He now shares his story encouraging students and aspiring entrepreneurs to never give up. Giella is the founder of Complete IT Service and Solutions Inc. located in Wesley Chapel.

THE LEROY COLLINS

# Hometown Hero Award

Presented to the Florida college alumnus who has achieved a measure of success within the nominating college's district and has demonstrated notable community involvement. Recipients have expressed a clear, relevant impact of his/her college experience upon their success.



## Ocala City Councilman Ire Bethea Sr.

*College of Central Florida*



College of Central Florida Alumni Ire J. Bethea Sr. has served the Ocala/Marion County community for over 30 years. When many college grads are wanting to leave their hometown to spread their wings, Bethea was encouraged by Hampton Junior College President William H. Jackson to get right to work in the local community. Hampton Junior College was one of 11 Black community colleges in Florida and merged with Central Florida Junior College (now CF) in 1966. Bethea graduated from CF in 1975.

Bethea retired after a combined 30 years of service with the City of Ocala and the Boys and Girls Club of Marion County. He currently represents District 2 on the Ocala City Council. He is a lifelong resident of Ocala and a graduate of Ocala High School, Central Florida Community College and St. Leo University.

A typical day in Bethea's service to the community continues after the work day ends at 5 p.m. He is credited

with volunteering for multiple organizations and committees across the area throughout his career and retirement. Many of his volunteer efforts are geared toward helping Marion County's youth.



Since his retirement in 2016, Bethea continues to mentor youth throughout the county. Today, he assists the Marion County Children's Alliance with delivering programming geared at sharing community resources and providing talks about the dangers of substance abuse.

Bethea is chairman of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Commemorative Commission. As such, he oversees projects like the Martin Luther King Jr. Day in the Park and is a committed leader who is the first to roll up his sleeves to get the work done.

Bethea has received many awards including the Racial Harmony & Cultural Awareness "Unsung Hero Award" in 2011, the NAACP's "Service and Uplift to the Community Award" in 2015 and the Rotary "Service Above Self Award" in 2019.

In 2020, Bethea received the College of Central Florida Distinguished Alumni award. He is a graduate of Leadership Ocala/Marion Alumni, Class XVII; was inducted into the African American Museum of Marion County in 2015; Past-Polemarch of the Gainesville Alumni Chapter of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.; received Man of the Year Award in 2006 from the Alumni Chapter, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Inc.; and serves as a Deacon at New St. John Missionary Baptist Church.

He has been married to Gloria F. Bethea for 29 years and they have seven children.

## LeRoy Collins Distinguished Alumni 2021 Hometown Hero Award Nominee

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### Ronald Toole

*Northwest Florida State College*

Ronald Toole's volunteerism and passion for Northwest Florida are unparalleled. A successful defense contractor by day, Toole has coordinated disaster relief efforts for hurricanes and those impacted by COVID-19, providing food and support to thousands of individuals. Toole credits the project management skills he gained at Northwest Florida State College not only for his successful career, but also for his exemplary volunteer efforts.

# *a Tribute*

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## FOR A LIFETIME OF SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION



A highlight of the Florida Association of Community Colleges alumni awards ceremony in 1990 was the presentation of the first Collins Distinguished Community College Alumni Award to former Governor LeRoy Collins. In presenting the award, then Governor Bob Martinez said, "This crystal tribute instantly conveys wisdom, esteem, commitment, integrity, and the highest possible achievement because it bears the name – LeRoy Collins. A true statesman, former Governor Collins is tireless in his efforts to improve the condition of his fellow man. It is most fitting that the Community College System has selected LeRoy Collins as the standard-bearer for its alumni."

Governor Collins responded, "There has been no service of our state that I have followed over the years with greater pride than that of our Florida community colleges... Nor is there any such service that I look forward to with more confidence and hope for the unfolding future."

In a letter following the ceremony, Collins wrote: "The FACC award was so deeply appreciated. The glass obelisk sits on a table by my favorite chair at home, and I continually enjoy the memory of the presentation. Most of all, I was so impressed with the five other presentations. Those alumni certainly came through and the state should be extremely proud of their records of service."

Collins served as governor during the formation of the community college system and was a strong supporter throughout his career. Upon his death in 1991, the Florida House of Representatives eulogized him as the "Floridian of the Twentieth Century," citing his courage in dealing with civil rights issues and his commitment to integrity and conscience, compassion, and justice.

# Previous Winners

2019

**Lifetime Achievement**

Captain Malcolm Johns, *Indian River State College*

**Against the Odds**

Johanna Cook, *Northwest Florida State College*

**Hometown Hero**

Police Chief Craig Capri, *Daytona State College*

**Rising Star**

James Kassaga Arinaitwe, *Tallahassee Community College*

2017

**Lifetime Achievement**

Tessa Angelo Suplee, *State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota*

**Against the Odds**

Tangie Archer, *St. Johns River State College*

**Hometown Hero**

Christine Jefferson Taylor, *Indian River State College*

2015

**Lifetime Achievement**

Marcia Mayer, *North Florida Community College*

**Against the Odds**

Kristina Garcia, *St. Johns River State College*

**Hometown Hero**

Edwin O. Swift III, *Florida Keys Community College*

**Rising Star**

Forrest "Max" Gooding, *South Florida State College*

2013

**Lifetime Achievement**

Rita Smith, *Polk State College*

**Against the Odds**

Carolyn Alfreda King, *Tallahassee Community College*

**Hometown Hero**

Robert Trammell, *Chipola College*

**Rising Star**

Corwin McCammon, *Indian River State College*

2011

**Lifetime Achievement**

Dr. David Andrews, *Pensacola State College*

**Against the Odds**

Maria Cardenas, *Florida SouthWestern State College*

**Hometown Hero**

Michelle Piccione, *St. Petersburg College*

**Rising Star**

Jodi Johnson, *State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota*

2009

**Lifetime Achievement**

Susan B. Hassmiller

**Apollo**

Melinda Thackrah

**Rising Star**

Ryan Blanco

2007

**Lifetime Achievement**

C.E. Barber

**Apollo**

Lalita Booth

**Rising Star**

Nadia Ramoutar

2005

Col. Danny R. McKnight

2004

Annie Bryant Montgomery

**Region Winners**

Richard McSpadden

Augustus Aikens Jr.

Bobby James

Wendell Ware

William Hood

2002

Allen R. Weiss

2001

Ed Burrow

2000

Wendell "Winkie" Williams

1999

Lynda Keever

1998

Dr. William B. Proctor

1997

Dr. Lloyd V. Hackley

1996

L. Frank Casey

1995

Dr. Samuel T. Durrance

1994

Carrie P. Meek

1993

Doug Marlette

1992

Clark Maxwell Jr.

1991

Dr. James Wattenbarger

Broward College  
Chipola College  
College of Central Florida  
College of the Florida Keys  
Daytona State College  
Eastern Florida State College  
Florida Gateway College  
Florida SouthWestern State College  
Florida State College at Jacksonville  
Gulf Coast State College  
Hillsborough Community College  
Indian River State College  
Lake-Sumter State College  
Miami Dade College  
North Florida College  
Northwest Florida State College  
Palm Beach State College  
Pasco-Hernando State College  
Pensacola State College  
Polk State College  
Santa Fe College  
Seminole State College of Florida  
South Florida State College  
State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota  
St. Johns River State College  
St. Petersburg College  
Tallahassee Community College  
Valencia College