

AARP Wisconsin: Milwaukee woman wins top volunteer award

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MADISON, WISCONSIN – Milwaukee resident Ms. Valerie Langston has been selected by AARP – the nonprofit organization for people age 50 and older – to receive the 2020 AARP Wisconsin Andrus Award for Community Service, which is the Association’s most prestigious and visible state volunteer award for community service.

“This award honors Valerie’s tireless commitment to making life better for those around her,” said AARP Wisconsin State Director Sam Wilson. “Through her volunteer service as a community organizer and activist who works tirelessly for the betterment of her neighborhood, Valerie has built up the trust, influence, and respect it takes to accomplish great things in her community. She is an inspiration to us all.”

Langston, a 25-year resident of Milwaukee’s Merrill Park/Hilltopper neighborhood, is a driven community organizer who is dedicated to creating a safe and welcoming community where families and children can live, play and grow, according to Britney Roberson, who nominated Valerie for the award.

Langston is the co-founder/leader of the Hilltopper Block Watch, and through this position is in regular contact with her neighbors, organizing clean-ups, hosting meetings with community organizations, and addressing challenges block-by-block through thoughtful, personal interventions.

Working through all parts of her neighborhood, Langston is committed to finding ways to reduce evictions, particularly among families and first-time renters, and can often be found talking to neighbors about the issues they are facing and connecting them with vital resources for tenant mediation and rent assistance.

Rather than relying strictly on police interventions, she has established a network of resources to assist and meet her neighbors where they are and find ways to address personal safety in the community in a more comprehensive way.

“Valerie’s persistence in the face of adversity and dedication to improving the lives of all her neighbors is what makes her work as a community organizer inspiring,” Roberson said.

“Her commitment to reducing tenant turnover and evictions in her neighborhood has led to her meeting with a variety of people, from first-time renters to landlords, to address challenges as they arise and connecting them directly to resources for support. She is willing to connect directly with all people and is truly committed to finding solutions that support the individuals and the neighborhood.”

Langston is also a volunteer with Near West Side Partners, serving as a representative of her neighborhood on the Resident Council. Through her position, she helps lead innovative and engaging events such as “Brat for Your Thoughts”, which are designed to bring neighbors together to build a sense of community connectedness.

As a Resident Council rep, Valerie has contributed to the development of the Near West Side Transformation Plan, an integral part of a \$1.3 million Choice Neighborhood Initiative (CNI) Planning Grant issued by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Her contributions to the plan include organizing neighbors for focus groups and review sessions, sharing goals and outcomes, and soliciting feedback from residents who are often hard to engage in community development projects.

Throughout this COVID-19 pandemic, Langston has been particularly involved in helping neighbors connect virtually to focus groups and planning meetings.

“Valerie embodies AARP’s purpose, demonstrating that everybody has the opportunity to contribute to their community, regardless of their age or situation. This is particularly apparent in her work supporting neighbors following the COVID-19 outbreak, helping them access online communities and stay connected virtually,” Roberson said.

Langston also plays an important role advocating for fresh food access in her neighborhood, which is identified as a food desert. She is an active volunteer at the

Near West Side Farmers Market, and regularly organizes her neighbors to make visits to area farmers markets, finding transportation when necessary.

She also works with neighbors and local businesses to explore opportunities to bring fresh food to the community," including through the formation of a food buying co-operative, still under consideration."

"Valerie does all of this without compensation or need for recognition. Her positive and humble attitude is infectious, encouraging all who work alongside her to see a greater vision of a community that is welcoming and safe to all who live and visit," Roberson said.

Langston, 62, has one adult son and a 1-year-old grandson. She has been retired for the past 2-1/2 years from her job as a mechanical product designer for the GE Waukesha Gas Engine Division.

She said she developed her community-minded spirit from her mother, and really enjoys helping her neighbors in any way she can. She was surprised to learn she had won the Andrus award. "It feels great to be recognized for something I do every day, just trying to make a difference, in my own little way. I must applaud all the community residents who volunteer to assist me, as I cannot accomplish change alone. It takes a village."

"Valerie's courage and willingness to connect no matter the circumstances is especially notable," Roberson said. "She will often approach reluctant neighbors in ways that meet them where they are, taking time to understand their reasons for not participating, and finding ways to welcome them into community efforts in a manner that is supportive and non-threatening."

As part of her award, Valerie was given the opportunity to select an organization to receive a \$1,000 donation from AARP. She has chosen to give the money to the Neighborhood House of Milwaukee – Community Center.

Recipients of the Andrus Award (named after AARP founder Ethel Percy Andrus) in each state across the nation are chosen for their ability to enhance the lives of AARP members and prospective members, improve the community in which the work was performed, and inspire others to volunteer.

"Valerie clearly goes above and beyond the definition of the word volunteer. She

serves as an inspiring example of the phrase ‘service before self,’” Wilson said. “She is committed to doing whatever she can to make life better for those around her and all of us as we age. She is truly one in a million.”