

Wisconsin Alumni Association: Forward Awards announced

Posted on Wednesday, Aug 10, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

Seven UW-Madison grads recognized for early-career achievements

MADISON, WI (August 10, 2022) — The Wisconsin Alumni Association today announced the recipients of the 2022 Forward Awards. This award acknowledges alumni who within 15 years of graduation from UW-Madison have demonstrated exceptional achievement and have been agents of positive change. These recipients are rising stars in various fields and exemplify the Wisconsin Idea through an emphasis on service, discovery, and progress.

Erika Dickerson-Despenza

As an award-winning poet and playwright, Erika Dickerson-Despenza's literary activism was informed by her experiences as a UW-Madison student, where she was a scholar in the urban-arts-focused First Wave Learning Community. That experience deepened her appreciation of the written word as a vehicle that can help communities achieve freedom. Her play, "cullud wattah," about the racism and politics of the water crisis in Flint, Michigan, and the devastating effects on three generations of a family of women, won the respected Susan Smith Blackburn Prize and debuted at New York's prestigious Public Theater. Dickerson-Despenza graduated from UW-Madison in 2014 with a degree in education, English, and gender and women's studies. She currently lives in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Anthony Heddlesten

Anthony Heddlesten is the mayor of Riverdale, IA. However, his “real job” is serving the nation as chief of the civil and environmental engineering department for the Rock Island District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Since 2008, Heddlesten’s duties have included levee repairs, managing hazardous waste, and environmental stewardship, such as restoring riverfront habitats and retrofitting a dam with hydroelectric power. The Minnesota native has also responded to calls for help. He built emergency levees in Fargo, North Dakota, and distributed meals, water, and ice to people in Louisiana after Hurricane Isaac. He’s also served as an emergency-management chief and lead engineer for levee repairs across the upper Midwest, where river towns are still recovering from damage caused by record flooding in 2019. Heddlesten graduated from UW-Madison in 2007 with a degree in civil and environmental engineering.

Cavalier (Chevy) Johnson

At UW-Madison, his classmates knew him by his nickname, Chevy. Today, Cavalier Johnson is back home in Milwaukee, where he’s best known as mayor. As the leader of the state’s largest and most diverse city, Johnson is on a quest to see that Milwaukee’s success is infused with the Wisconsin Idea. “I recognize, and I think my fellow Badgers do as well, that when Milwaukee does well, then the region does well,” Johnson says. After winning office in April 2022 by a two-to-one margin, Johnson is focused on economic development and public safety, including reducing reckless driving and gun violence. He’s the first African American elected mayor of Milwaukee since the city was founded in 1846. He’s also the second African American elected mayor in all of Wisconsin. Johnson is a 2009 UW-Madison graduate, with a degree in political science.

Katie Lorenz

Katie Lorenz started her fair-trade apparel company, Campo Alpaca, following a 2017 visit to Cusco, Peru. She was inspired by the kindness of people and their alpaca-fiber craftsmanship. “I learned that they earned so little from creating beautiful pieces of work and selling it to tourists,” she says. “To me, this was

heartbreaking.” Using her expertise in retailing and marketing, she designed the business as a social-impact venture, ensuring artisans receive fair wages and good working conditions. Campo sources high-quality alpaca goods from six different women-run and family-operated artisan collectives in Peru. As the knitters and weavers create the company’s classic-design sweaters, blankets, cold-weather accessories, and fluffy toys, most of these vendors are also able to work from home and care for their families. Lorenz lives in Chicago. She majored in marketing, management, and human resources, earning her degree in 2012.

David J. O’Connor

In public schools across Wisconsin, students are required to learn about the state’s American Indian Nations, mandated by legislation known as Wisconsin Act 31. David J. O’Connor helps educators to share this information, making sure the material is accurate, authentic, and specific to Wisconsin. “I want people to understand that as Indigenous people, as Native people, we have shaped the state long before the state was even a thought,” O’Connor says. “And more importantly, we’ll shape Wisconsin tomorrow.” In his work as the American Indian studies consultant at the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, O’Connor trains educators how to teach First Nations’ histories, tribal sovereignty, treaties, languages, and cultures. Working with PBS Wisconsin, the UW-Madison School of Education, and others, O’Connor was instrumental in creating WisconsinFirstNations.org, a collection of resources about the 12 American Indian nations present in the state. O’Connor lives in Madison. At the UW, he earned his bachelor’s degree in history, his master’s degree in educational leadership and policy analysis, and certificates in American Indian studies and Chican@ and Latin@ studies.

Maria Ontiveros

Maria Ontiveros is the cofounder of Mercado on Fifth, a popular Quad Cities destination where families, artisans, and foodies gather to celebrate Hispanic culture. “It’s a public space that welcomes the whole community, but Hispanics are the majority,” Ontiveros says. “People feel proud to be Hispanic here; it’s a place for people to connect with their roots.” Along a block on Moline’s Fifth Avenue, not far from the Mississippi River waterfront, Mercado on Fifth hosts a weekly festival-style

market throughout spring and summer, featuring live music, kids' activities, and locally made eats and treats. The gatherings began as a longtime wish of Ontiveros's grandfather Bob, a Quad Cities business executive and philanthropist who died in early 2022. Together, they worked alongside family and community partners to create his vision for an outdoor market in the mostly Hispanic Floreciente neighborhood where Bob grew up. More than 50 new businesses have been started with support from Mercado on Fifth. Today, vendor spaces at the outdoor markets offer local Hispanic chefs, artists, and entrepreneurs a place to thrive with pride and, Ontiveros says, to inspire the next generation. Ontiveros graduated from UW-Madison in 2012 with a degree in international studies and Chinese.

Danez Smith

Danez Smith's work isn't just to write poetry. It's also to help create a world where people can live louder and dream better. "I think what I do as a poet is one small part of that," Smith says. As an inventive novelist/storyteller and powerful spoken-word performer, Smith infuses purpose throughout their works about race, class, sexuality, faith, and social justice. "I want art that facilitates liberation for Black people, for queer people, for trans folx, art that encourages resistance," Smith has said. "It's important for me as a nonbinary, Black, HIV-positive person to talk about how I'm happy and how I'm in love and how I expect to live a good life." Smith has been lighting up stages, YouTube channels, and poetry-slam championships since honing their talents in the first cohort of UW-Madison's First Wave Hip Hop and Urban Arts Learning Community, which blends academics and activism with multicultural arts, such as visual arts, movement, music, and performance poetry. Smith lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. They graduated from UW-Madison in 2012 with a degree in English.

Learn more about all the Forward Award recipients at uwalumni.com/about/alumni-awards/forward-award.