

Contact: Julie Cruz Blair

   President & CEO

   Phone (440) 281-8535

   Director@leadershiploraincounty.com

**Leadership Lorain County Celebrates 22nd Difference Makers Gala**

**Leadership Lorain County** will celebrate the exceptional community contributions of its 2025 Difference Maker Award honorees during the **22nd Difference Makers Gala and Excellence in Leadership Awards** on **Friday, February 21, 2025**, at the Spitzer Conference Center in Elyria, Ohio. The event will honor individuals and an organization for their impactful leadership and dedication to the Lorain County community.

From over 35 nominations, five awards will be presented: the **Eric Nord Award**, two **Difference Makers**, the **Emerald Award**, and the **Difference Maker Organization Award**. Honorees were selected through a rigorous review process by a committee of Lorain County leaders and Leadership Lorain County Board members.

Media are invited to meet the honorees for interviews and photos at **5:15 PM** before the event.

The 2025 Difference Makers are:

**Eric Nord Award for Excellence in Leadership** **Dolores Baker**

*Director of Civic Engagement & Outreach*

*Lorain County Urban League*

**Excellence in Leadership Award** **Alicia Foss**

*President & Chief Executive Officer*

 *Neighborhood Alliance*

**Excellence in Leadership Award** **Joan Perch**

*Executive Director*

*Fire Fish Arts*

**Emerald Award for Inspirational Leadership** **Chase Farris**

*Executive Director*

*Save Our Children of Elyria*

**Excellence in Leadership Award** **Good Knights**

**Organization**

**Dolores Baker**

Dolores “Dee” Baker is a powerhouse of community advocacy and leadership, currently serving as the Director of Civic Engagement and Outreach for the Lorain County Urban League. In this role, Dee tackles critical public issues, champions community concerns, and collaborates with decision-makers to drive meaningful societal change.

Dee's impressive career began in leadership roles at Ford Motor Company and General Electric Aircraft Engines, where she was a prominent member of the African American Forum (AAF) and an active contributor to the Greater Cincinnati community. As the visionary founder of the Tri-State Minority Opportunity Fair (TRISMOP) and co-founder of the Valley Learning Center, she has created opportunities for countless individuals. Her influence extended to her work with the Midwest Black Family Reunion planning team in Cincinnati and as host of a community-focused talk show on WMKV radio.

Returning to Northeast Ohio, Dee brought her passion for empowerment to Cleveland-based nonprofit Henkels and McCoy, guiding youth and young adults toward economic self-sufficiency. Her unwavering commitment to community upliftment has earned her notable accolades, including the 2022 Outstanding Community Service Award from Second Baptist Church of Elyria and the 2024 Advocacy Award presented by The African American Community Fund of Lorain County's Community Foundation. Dee’s experiences span the globe, with extensive travels across North America, Africa, Asia, and Europe enriching her perspective.

A dedicated community leader, Dee serves on Main Street Lorain, Leadership Lorain County, and the Palace Theater boards. She also chairs the Membership Committee of the Lorain County Democratic Women's Club and contributes to the Lorain County Section of the National Council of Negro Women. At True Vine Primitive Baptist Church, Dee leads as President of the Pastor's Aide Ministry, embodying her deep faith and commitment to service.

A graduate of the National Urban League's Congressional Advocacy Program and a lifetime member of the Urban League, Dee’s work reflects her steadfast dedication to racial justice, equity, and empowering underserved communities. Her passion is matched by her values, as reflected in one of her favorite scriptures, Proverbs 3:5-6, which guides her life and work.

Dee resides in Lorain with her husband, Larry, and is the proud mother of her “favorite” and only son, Marcus, and doting grandmother to two grandchildren. A dynamic leader and compassionate advocate, Dee Baker is a driving force for positive change in every sphere she touches.

**Alicia Foss**

Alicia Foss is a trailblazing leader with over 25 years of experience in nonprofit management and human resources, redefining what’s possible in community care. As the dynamic CEO of Neighborhood Alliance, Alicia has revolutionized Lorain County’s social services landscape, driving growth, innovation, and impact.

Under her leadership, Neighborhood Alliance has soared to new heights—boosting revenue by an impressive $3 million in just five years, doubling its workforce, and tripling its program offerings. Alicia’s bold vision inspired the launch of a groundbreaking three-site, six-phase capital campaign that has already raised over $8 million in just four years. Her creative approach has transformed outdated spaces into vital community resources, including converting the former women’s locker room in the Elyria YMCA into a state-of-the-art catering kitchen and expanding the Haven Center Emergency Shelter in Lorain by 9,000 square feet. This addition not only tripled available dorm rooms for unhoused families but also established Ohio’s first non-congregate mass shelter.

The new **Neighborhood Nutrition Kitchen** will serve over 350,000 meals in 2024—more than double the 2023 output—providing essential nutrition to seniors, shelter residents, and children. Alicia’s innovative solutions and tenacious leadership have cemented her reputation as a changemaker in addressing community challenges.

Known for building powerful partnerships across public, private, and nonprofit sectors, Alicia thrives on creating solutions during crises. Her influence extends beyond Neighborhood Alliance through her involvement in initiatives like the Southside Gateway Community Plan Steering Committee, Lorain County Continuum of Care, Coalition for Quality Aging, and Avon Hospital Community Advisory Council.

Alicia holds a Master of Science in Nonprofit Management and Leadership, along with multiple HR certifications, combining academic excellence with hands-on expertise. Her strategic planning and fundraising acumen have secured millions in grants and donations. Her leadership has earned Neighborhood Alliance prestigious accolades, including the David and Martha Hessler Illuminating Hope Award, solidifying the organization as a beacon of hope in Lorain County.

In 2024, Alicia expanded her impact by founding **Strategy and Sage, LLC**, a consulting firm dedicated to empowering small businesses and nonprofits with creative, strategic solutions. Balancing her professional achievements with personal resilience, Alicia is also a dedicated advocate for her daughter, Izzy, who has Cerebral Palsy. A 2014 graduate of Neighborhood Alliance’s Early Intervention program, Izzy’s journey has profoundly shaped Alicia’s advocacy and leadership.

Alicia Foss is more than a leader—she’s a visionary force driving transformation and building a brighter future for her community.

**Joan Perch**

A passionate arts advocate, Joan Perch has spent over 35 years promoting the idea that there is more to the arts in Northeast Ohio than what’s hanging on museum walls. Through galleries and festivals, as an arts/STEAM educator, Perch champions local art as a creative, civic, cultural, and economic engine that can bring new life to our communities and Lorain County.

 A results-oriented innovator with a broad range of experience in arts and STEAM education, entrepreneurship, creative place-making, and the intersection of arts and technology, she began her career as an arts educator, owned and operated several successful art galleries in downtown Cleveland, and was the founder of RED Dot Project, a social enterprise that utilized web-based technologies to market the art of NEO regional artists. She is also a founder of the Cleveland Sparx Arts Hop and was an arts coordinator in the early Ingenuity Festivals of Art and Technology. She also founded and directed Lorain County's Follow the Fish Art and Adventure Trail.

As the former Coordinator of Lorain Community Colleges’ Beth K. Stocker Art Gallery and Program Coordinator at the Campana Center for Ideation and Invention, Joan Perch founded and directed the   FireFish STEAM Teen Academy, a summer apprentice program for urban teens. Developed in partnership with the FireFish Festival in Lorain, Ohio, where she now serves as Artistic Director, that program has evolved and is now known as the FireFish SPARKS! Internship.

As Artistic Director of FireFish Artist and a  champion of local artists,  Joan Perch works with a team of artists, educators, and arts non-profits across disciplines to encourage broader community involvement in both the arts and the annual FireFish Festival.   A longtime resident of Lorain County, Perch was one of two recipients of the 2020  [Ohio Governor’s Award for the Arts](https://oac.ohio.gov/governorsawards) in Community Impact.

Joan is an aspiring artist and printmaker and enjoys collecting art by local artists.  She also enjoys hanging out in all the cool new places in Lorain, many operated by Lorain artists and creatives and with her family, friends, and dogs.

**Chase Farris**

Born and raised in Elyria, Chase’s deep-rooted passion for his community fuels his mission to uplift the next generation.

A graduate of The Ohio State University, Chase earned a Bachelor’s degree in Financial Services and a Master’s in Sport Management, but it was on the football field where he first made his mark. A former player for the New England Patriots, Chase reached the pinnacle of success as a Super Bowl Champion and a National Champion during his collegiate career at Ohio State. These achievements, though extraordinary, are only part of Chase’s story.

Having grown up navigating challenges similar to those faced by the youth he now serves; Chase is uniquely positioned to make a meaningful impact. His journey from Elyria’s streets to NFL glory gives him an authentic understanding of resilience, hard work, and the importance of mentorship. Through **Save Our Children**, Chase channels his love for sports and his drive to give back into programs that teach invaluable life skills like leadership, teamwork, and perseverance.

Under his leadership, the organization has become a beacon of hope, offering resources, mentorship, and opportunities that empower young people to rise above their circumstances. Chase’s efforts go beyond coaching—they’re about transforming lives. His work ensures that every child in Elyria, regardless of their background, has the chance to dream big and achieve even bigger.

A firm believer in the power of community, Chase embodies the philosophy that greatness is not just about personal success but about lifting others along the way. Whether he is on the field, in the boardroom, or in the heart of his community, Chase Farris is an unstoppable force for good, proving that every child deserves the tools and support to realize their potential.

**Good Knights**

**Good Knights of Lorain County** is more than a nonprofit—it’s a movement transforming the lives of children in Lorain and Cuyahoga counties, one bed at a time. Founded in 2020 by **Dr. Roger Dorsey**, the organization was born from a deeply personal mission. Having experienced the hardship of sleeping on the floor as a child, Dr. Dorsey vowed to ensure that no child in his community would face the same struggle.

Since its humble beginnings, **Good Knights** has delivered over 3,600 beds to children in need, supported by the tireless efforts of thousands of volunteers. But it’s not just about beds—it’s about building brighter futures. A safe, comfortable bed means more than a good night's sleep; it’s a foundation for better health, stronger well-being, and academic success. Good Knights recognize that quality sleep is a vital stepping stone for growth and development, giving children the tools they need to dream bigger—both literally and figuratively.

In 2023, the organization’s transformative work earned it two major accolades. It was named **Community Partner of the Year** by Rotary District 6630, a testament to its collaborative spirit and enduring community impact. Good Knights was also awarded the **Hero for Children** honor by Blessing House, further cementing its reputation as a champion for Northeast Ohio’s most vulnerable children.

With every bed delivered, Good Knights are restoring dignity, offering hope, and giving families a reason to believe in a brighter tomorrow. From a spark of inspiration to a wave of compassion, the organization proves that sometimes, the path to changing lives begins with something as simple—and essential—as a good night’s sleep.

**More About the Difference Makers Gala**

More information on each of the 2025 Difference Makers honorees can be found on the LLC website at [www.leadershiploraincounty.com](http://www.leadershiploraincounty.com/) or like our Facebook page facebook.com/leadershiploraincounty.

**About Leadership Lorain County**

The mission of Leadership Lorain County is 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. 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, and able to lead initiatives within the dynamics of our community, all while helping their organizations become a valued partners in the resurgence of Lorain County.