



Youth Excellence Awards 2026

HONOREE BOOK

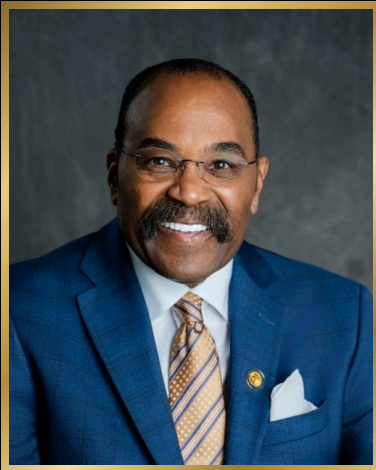


Celebrating our 2026 honorees

Sunday, October 18th, 2026 · Bob Crane Community Center, Upper Arlington, Ohio

Most Committed Resilience Ally

ELECTED OFFICIAL AWARD



OHIO STATE SENATOR

Hearcel F. Craig

Senator Hearcel F. Craig has been a longtime friend of MY Project USA, consistently encouraging its work and standing with the young people and families it serves. As he completes his final term in the Ohio Senate, we honor his years of public service and community leadership, and his support for organizations working on the front lines across Central Ohio.

The Catalyst of Change Award

Raifa Alhag-Ali

Raifa Alhag-Ali joined MY Project USA at age 16, during a period of serious gun and gang violence in the Hilltop neighborhood, and helped build and lead MY Reading Warriors, which supported hundreds of children in education, confidence and resilience. She later served on MY Project USA's Board of Directors, and when the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families faced serious challenges, she led the rebuilding of its student team, which in one year reached more than 2,000 families with healthcare services, cancer prevention education and screenings. She is now a fourth-year medical student at The Ohio State University.



Excellence in Journalism Awards



Mariam Abaza

EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM
& ADVOCACY AWARD

Mariam Abaza is an emerging journalist and public-service leader. A summa cum laude graduate of The Ohio State University in Journalism and Public Management, Leadership and Policy, she was selected as a 2026 Dow Jones News Fund Fellow, one of 79 chosen nationally from more than 800 applicants, and placed with The Marshall Project. She is a Muslim Public Service Network Fellow, and her reporting focuses on food insecurity, healthcare access, immigration and civic engagement.

Amani Bayo

EXCELLENCE IN JOURNALISM
& COMMUNITY STORYTELLING AWARD

Amani Bayo is a reporter with The Columbus Dispatch covering Columbus communities, immigration, culture and Muslim life, and host of the Dispatch's "Columbus in Color" podcast. Her in-depth project on merit in higher education won Third Place for In-Depth Reporting from the Ohio News Media Association, and she mentors local high school students through Columbus Journalists in Training.



The Most Resilient Youth Advocate Award



Jana Alo

Jana Alo, who is DeafBlind, has met lifelong challenges with remarkable courage and become a powerful voice for accessibility. She has advocated at the Ohio Statehouse alongside fellow advocates to help restore vital funding for people with disabilities across Ohio, showing everyone around her what resilience and determination look like.

WITH COMPLIMENTS OF



TURKISH AMERICAN SOCIETY OF OHIO

Congratulations, Honorees!

The Turkish American Society of Ohio congratulates every 2026 honoree of the MY Project USA Youth Excellence Awards. Your dedication to service and to one another inspires us all. We are proud to celebrate the young people who are building bridges between communities and a brighter future for Central Ohio. Congratulations, and keep shining!

— Turkish American Society of Ohio

THE
Deah Barakat
AWARDS



"I have a dream one day, to have a unified and structured community. Have a voice in our society and support the youth with their projects."

DEAH BARAKAT

Deah Shaddy Barakat was a 23-year-old dental student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who lived a life of service. He raised funds to bring dental care to Syrian refugee children in Turkey and regularly helped feed homeless neighbors in his community. On February 10, 2015, Deah, his wife Yusor Abu-Salha and her sister Razan Abu-Salha were killed in their home in Chapel Hill. The Deah Barakat Awards carry his light forward by honoring people who serve their communities with compassion, dedication and leadership.

Deah's Changemaker of the Year Award



Alina Hussain

Alina Hussain has dedicated her weekends since 2024 to youth engagement, mentorship and community outreach with MY Project USA, helping strengthen MY Leaders Lab, MY Wellness Warriors, Unspoken Reality, Climate Justice Warriors and the Interfaith Youth Iftar. Her coordination supports MY Project USA's partnerships with the City of Columbus Department of Neighborhoods and ADAMH, and she works to ensure that Muslim girls and young women are encouraged to lead, advocate and shape the future of their communities.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR NONPROFIT SPONSOR



NOOR ISLAMIC CULTURAL CENTER

Congratulations, Honorees!

On behalf of the Noor Islamic Cultural Center, we extend our heartfelt congratulations to every 2026 honoree. Your service, compassion and leadership are a source of pride for our whole community. You remind us that faith is lived through action, and that young people are not only the leaders of tomorrow but the builders of today. We are honored to stand with MY Project USA in celebrating you, and we pray that your light continues to grow and guide others.

— The Noor Islamic Cultural Center family

THE BRAINWAVES PROJECT

Recipients of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award



Mumdooh Nadeem

Mumdooh Nadeem, Program Manager for The BrainWaves Project, a youth-led organization that makes neuroscience education available to the community, helped plan and co-lead its inaugural Walk for Brain Health, which drew more than 100 attendees and 10 sponsors and raised \$1,500 for the Ohio State Neuroscience Research Institute. As a Youth Leader at the Noor Islamic Cultural Center, he helps serve more than 175 families each month through food pantries and leads interfaith outreach, all while serving as Sophomore Class President.

Miqdad Hussain

Miqdad Hussain is Executive Director and Co-Founder of The BrainWaves Project, a youth-led organization that makes neuroscience education available to the community. He led the All About Alzheimer's (2025) and Brain Health Matters (2026) campaigns, raising thousands of dollars for local neuroscience research and Alzheimer's awareness, and built a six-member executive committee to grow the organization. He has also served as a Chair on the Muslim Youth of North America Annual Convention Committee, coordinating programs for thousands of young people.



Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Rida Ali
WALK FOR BRAIN
HEALTH



Ayaan Syed
DEVELOPMENT
COORDINATOR



Pallavi Sistla
COMMITTEE ADVISOR



Nidhi Kunduru
EDUCATION
COORDINATOR

The BrainWaves Project is a youth-led organization that makes neuroscience education available to the community. This year its committee planned the first Walk for Brain Health, which drew more than 100 attendees and 10 sponsors and raised \$1,500 for the Ohio State Neuroscience Research Institute, ran a pickleball fundraiser and led hands-on neuroscience workshops for students across Columbus.



CLIMATE JUSTICE WARRIORS

Recipient of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award



Kian Haq

Kian Haq first came to MY Project USA at 16, helping in the community garden, the food pantry and wherever else he was needed. In 2025 he built the Climate Justice Warriors from the ground up and, as Chair of the Climate Justice Lab, grew the team from six high school students to 11 student leaders. On days when no one else could come, Kian came, and he made sure his team came back too. He led the warehouse transformation through winter cold and spring floods, and helped bring the Climate Justice Lab to its opening in August 2026. Kian is the glue that holds his team together.

Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Grant Miller



Ishant Ghimiray



Maddox Norman



Nurdeen Issack



Rafael Bersani

What began in November 2025 with six determined high school students has grown into a youth-led environmental justice movement at MY Project USA. Through freezing winter weekends in an unheated warehouse, the Climate Justice Warriors sorted thousands of donated items, including 3,000 pairs of shoes and 2,000 toys, stayed through the clean-up after the March 2026 floods, and helped open the Climate Justice Lab in August 2026.



MY WELLNESS WARRIORS

Recipient of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award



Haady Khalil

Haady Khalil first volunteered with MY Project USA in 2015, packing meals. This year he co-led education and curriculum for the MY Wellness Warriors Summer Program, a MY Project USA program that teaches young people about mental well-being, resilience and healthy habits, while studying for his Master of Social Work at The Ohio State University. His leadership and dedicated service have helped young people care for their minds as well as their bodies.

Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Uroosa Khan
YOUTH COUNSELOR



Heba El-Hosseiny
YOUTH MENTOR



Hashim Chawdry
WELLNESS COORDINATOR

MY Wellness Warriors is a MY Project USA program that teaches young people about mental well-being, resilience and healthy habits. These three mentors guided youth through the MY Wellness Warriors Summer Program, helped shape its curriculum and continue to serve in the year-round program, bridging the gap between parents and youth on mental health.

MY FAMILY PANTRY



An initiative of MY Project USA

MY FAMILY PANTRY

Recipient of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award



Saad Ijaz

Saad Ijaz has served MY Project USA since the eighth grade and, since April 2025, has chaired MY Family Pantry, a MY Project USA food pantry serving about 10,000 people a month, placing orders, managing volunteers and overseeing its operations. For more than a year he has also served as Secretary of the MY Project USA Board of Directors. He graduated summa cum laude from The Ohio State University in Mathematics in 2026 and received a 2025 Pelotonia Undergraduate Research Scholarship for cancer immunotherapy research.

Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Ayesha Mirza
NUTRITION &
INVENTORY CHAIR



Adam Kashk
OPERATIONS
SUPERVISOR



Eraj Piracha
SOCIAL MEDIA
COORDINATOR



Ahmad Alsabbar
VOLUNTEER
COORDINATOR



Numa Mujeeb
CLIENT RELATIONS
COORDINATOR



Leena Quraishi
CLIENT RELATIONS
COORDINATOR

MY Family Pantry, a MY Project USA food pantry, serves about 10,000 people a month, and these young volunteers keep it running every week: managing inventory and nutrition, directing Saturday distribution, welcoming clients, coordinating volunteers and sharing the pantry's work with the community.

FULL-PAGE SPONSOR AD

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HILLTOP FREE CLINIC

Recipients of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award

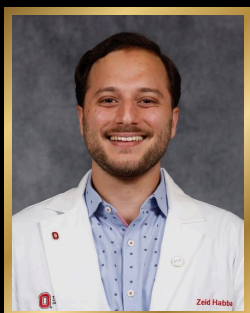


Dr. Khalid Mumtaz

Dr. Khalid Mumtaz, Professor of Medicine and Director of Hepatology at The Ohio State University, has supported the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families since its founding. Stepping forward as Chair of its Advisory Board during a critical period in 2026, he helped rebuild and strengthen the clinic's student leadership team and expand its services. He has published more than 150 research papers and is a Fellow of the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases.

Dr. Saima Khawaja

Dr. Saima Khawaja, an internal medicine physician and founder of The Whole List Doc in Columbus, serves as administrator of the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families and a member of its Advisory Board, overseeing clinic operations and supervising and training medical students. She was instrumental in MY Project USA's McKesson Foundation-funded cancer screening initiative, serving every Saturday to expand preventive care in underserved communities, and has taught young people about mental well-being and resilience through MY Wellness Warriors.

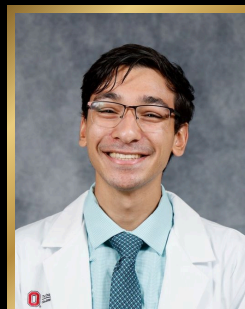


Zeid Habbab

Zeid Habbab, a medical student at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, has served as Chair of the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families since March 2026, strengthening its administrative team, recruiting new volunteers and supporting the growth of its healthcare services. He represents his Class of 2028 on the College of Medicine Student Council, helps lead Ohio State's chapter of Physicians for Human Rights, and has co-authored published medical research.

Hasan Abaza

Hasan Abaza, a medical student and President of the American Muslim Medical Student Association chapter at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, has served since January 2026 as Lab Manager, phlebotomist and administrative leader of the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families. He helped rebuild the clinic's volunteer team, trained medical students and volunteers, strengthened laboratory operations and supported the McKesson Foundation-funded Cancer Prevention Project. A summa cum laude graduate in Medical Laboratory Science, he has contributed to published research at the Ohio State Comprehensive Cancer Center.

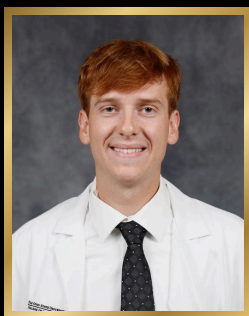




HILLTOP FREE CLINIC

Recipients of

Deah's Excellence in Community Service & Leadership Award



Zachary Lewald

Zachary Lewald, a third-year medical student at The Ohio State University College of Medicine, serves as Vice Chair of the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families, where he played an instrumental role in rebuilding clinic operations in 2026 and ensured continuity of care for underserved patients. Alongside Alina Haq, he co-led the Hilltop Free Clinic's McKesson Foundation Cancer Prevention Initiative, which reached 1,899 underserved households with cancer prevention education, screening and outreach. He is a 2026 recipient of the National Institutes of Health STRIVE-T₃₅ Research Training Award and has contributed to published research in pediatric infectious disease and vaccine effectiveness.

Alina Haq

Alina Haq, a graduate of The Ohio State University in Pharmaceutical Sciences and an aspiring physician, became one of the most dependable student leaders of the Hilltop Free Clinic, a MY Project USA initiative providing free healthcare to underserved families, recruiting, training and mentoring volunteers during a critical period of rebuilding. She co-led the Hilltop Free Clinic's McKesson Foundation Cancer Prevention Initiative, which reached 1,899 underserved households with cancer prevention education, screening and outreach, mobilizing 57 volunteers who gave about 750 hours. As co-coordinator of the Ohio State Wexner Medical Center Hands-Only CPR Internship, she personally trained more than 1,250 community members in CPR, and she serves as undergraduate co-coordinator of the Asian Free Clinic.



Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Rayahn Sharif



Waleed Hussain



Tridib Chakraborty



Zaghun Khalil

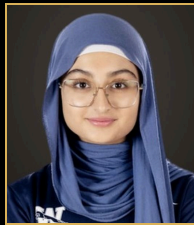
These dedicated volunteers help bring free, accessible healthcare to underserved families at the Hilltop Free Clinic, from recruiting volunteer physicians and providers to clinic operations, hands-on projects, and community events like the clinic's 5K and barbecue.



HILLTOP FREE CLINIC • CANCER PREVENTION INITIATIVE

Recipients of

Deah's Community Service Award



Aayzah Khan



Abdullah Ahmed



Yasmine Kurdi



Athena Saha



Tammy Chiu



Laila Abukar

Led by Alina Haq and working alongside Zachary Lewald, these six Ohio State students helped make the Hilltop Free Clinic's McKesson Foundation Cancer Prevention Initiative a success, reaching 1,899 underserved households with cancer prevention education, screening and outreach.

Recipient of

Deah's Community Service Award



Umair Qidwai

MY PROJECT USA MAIN ADMIN TEAM

For the last two years, Umair Qidwai has volunteered behind the scenes with MY Project USA's main administration team, supporting data collection, IT and backend systems from donor data to communications, administrative work, accounting and grant compliance. His quiet, steady work helps keep the whole organization running.

THE
Chrys Gee
ACTIVIST AWARD



In memory of Chrys Gee

Chrys Gee was a beloved Central Ohio activist whose compassion and courage for social justice touched our whole community. She showed up for others and inspired everyone around her to do the same. MY Project USA created this annual award to honor and further her legacy, and to foster more social justice activists like her. It was first presented at the MY Project USA Annual Dinner & Awards Ceremony on February 23, 2019.

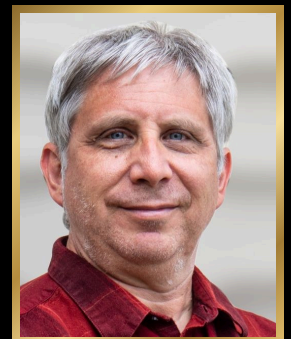


Cathy Cowan Becker

Cathy Cowan Becker has been a dedicated voice for social and environmental justice in Central Ohio for more than a decade. She is co-founder and Board President of Save Ohio Parks, former Executive Director of Simply Living, and former leader of the Sierra Club's Ready for 100 campaign, and she has received the Carol Fisher Award for Community Service and recognition from Ohio State's John Glenn College of Public Affairs.

Dr. Paul Becker

Dr. Paul Becker, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Dayton, is an activist photographer whose public archive of nearly 15,000 photographs preserves the history of grassroots movements in Central Ohio. His work has supported the Columbus Free Press, Indivisible Central Ohio, Ohio Immigrant Alliance, Save Ohio Parks and Veterans for Peace, and he received the 2025 Libby Award for Community Activism from the Columbus Free Press.



THE RESILIENCE AWARDS

The Most Resilient Team Member Award



Nasir Shinwari

Nasir Shinwari joined MY Project USA in 2022 as Pantry Manager and has since become Office Manager and head of operations, keeping the organization's buildings, youth center and warehouse running, leading pantry and warehouse staff, and making sure every client and volunteer is cared for. In Zerqa Abid's words, he is "the most reliable, most loyal team member we could have."

A MESSAGE FROM OUR NONPROFIT SPONSOR



NORTH AMERICAN INDIAN MUSLIM ASSOCIATION

Congratulations, Honorees!

The North American Indian Muslim Association joins MY Project USA in celebrating the 2026 honorees. Each of you has shown what it means to bridge communities: showing up for neighbors, lifting up those in need and leading with kindness. NAIMA is proud to celebrate you tonight. Congratulations on this well-deserved recognition, and thank you for the example you set for all of us.

— NAIMA, Bridging Communities

THE HAQ FAMILY

Recipients of

Most Committed Resilience Ally

FAMILY AWARD



The Haq Family has served MY Project USA across many areas with rare consistency. Dr. Sadia Afaz is one of the most dependable volunteer medical providers at the Hilltop Free Clinic; Alina Haq has been a backbone of the clinic's volunteer efforts and co-led its cancer screening initiative; and Kian Haq has led as Chair of the Climate Justice Lab. As a family, they have supported MY Project USA through their time, service and generosity. In Dr. Afaz's words: "Serve others to serve your creator."

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Recipients of

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SMALL BUSINESS PARTNER AWARD



ALIA
HEALTHCARE SERVICES

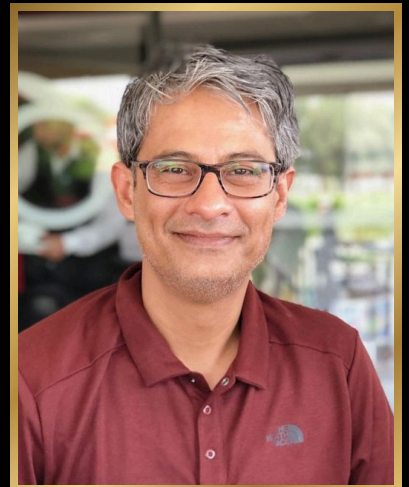
Sandra Osman

Alia Healthcare Services, represented by Sandra Osman, has stood with MY Project USA since 2015, helping the organization build its foundation in its earliest years. The partnership continues today through support for youth leadership development in MY Leaders Lab, and Sandra Osman has now joined the MY Project USA Board of Directors.

My
Apna
BAZAAR

Shabbar Abbas

Apna Bazaar, represented by Shabbar Abbas, is recognized as a committed small business partner of MY Project USA, standing with its work for youth and families in Central Ohio and helping the community whenever it was needed.





foodbank | farm | pharmacy | kitchen | market

MID-OHIO FOOD COLLECTIVE

Recipient of

Most Committed Resilience Ally

NONPROFIT LEADERSHIP AWARD



Matt Habash

Matt Habash of the Mid-Ohio Food Collective is recognized for his nonprofit leadership and committed partnership with MY Project USA, supporting its work to feed and serve youth and families across Central Ohio.

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Recipients of

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NONPROFIT PARTNER AWARD



614 Muslim Run Club



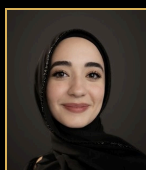
Adnan Khattab



Fatimah
Massoud



Heba
El-Hosseiny



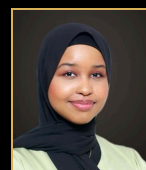
Jumana Edor



Khalid
Mohammed Ali



Mohammed
Alamodi



Nima Abib



Salma Albarrad



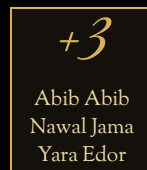
Sammer
Hamed



Yazan Edor



Yousef
Mahmoud



+3
Abib Abib
Nawal Jama
Yara Edor

From organizing the Empower the Future 5K to supporting our Climate Justice Warriors and volunteering at the Hilltop Community Garden, 614 Muslim Run Club has stepped forward whenever we needed more hands, building a culture of service among young Muslim professionals.



Turkish American Society of Ohio

The Turkish American Society of Ohio is recognized as a committed nonprofit partner of MY Project USA, standing with its work for youth and families in Central Ohio.

Noor Islamic Cultural Center

Noor Islamic Cultural Center has walked alongside MY Project USA in serving youth and families in Central Ohio, and is one of tonight's nonprofit sponsors.



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Thank You

for celebrating our 2026 honorees with us,
and for believing in the young people of our community.

WITH GRATITUDE TO OUR NONPROFIT SPONSORS



NAIMA
BRIDGING COMMUNITIES



Support our youth
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