

## American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP) to Host 2023 ASPIRE Awards Sunday, October 22 at Maggiano's Little Italy

*First Legally-Blind Division I Athlete Aaron Golub to Headline as Special Guest Speaker*

**Atlanta, September 16, 2023**– The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs, Inc. (AAASP) will honor **43** key people and organizations on October 22<sup>nd</sup> for their outstanding contributions to support student athletes with physical disabilities to get “off the sidelines and into the game.” The Fifth Annual ASPIRE Awards Celebration, emceed by actor, writer and television personality **Patrick Cusick** with special guest speaker, **Aaron Golub**, the first ever, legally-blind Division I Athlete representing Tulane will be held Sunday, October 22<sup>nd</sup> at Maggiano's Little Italy, 3368 Peachtree Road, Atlanta, Georgia. **Adapted Sports Programs in Recreation and Education (ASPIRE) Award** recognizes the significant contributions of these individuals and organizations that have been central to the mission of making adapted sports programming available nationwide. Through these programs, student athletes with physical disabilities across the country reap the physical, social, emotional, and academic benefits of competitive athletics resulting in personal and social empowerment. AAASP received a record 59 nominations for the awards this year.

**Nominees for this year's ASPIRE Awards are listed below, and continued on next page, by award nomination:**

### **ELI WOLFF AWARD FOR ADVOCACY NOMINATIONS**

**Belinda Cook**, DeKalb Silver Streaks, DeKalb County Schools  
**GAEL (Georgia Association of Educational Leaders) Robert "Buddy" Costley**, Executive Director of GAEL  
**Ed Shaddix /Athletic Director (Retired)**, Gwinnett Heat, Gwinnett County Public Schools

### **COACH OF THE YEAR (Varsity) NOMINATIONS**

**Jeremy Downing**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools  
**Stephen Roberson**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools  
**Bryan Watts**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools  
**Dr. Nicholas Griffin**, West Georgia Wolverines, Troup County Schools

### **COACH OF THE YEAR (Junior Varsity) NOMINATIONS**

**Len Boudreaux**, Gwinnett Heat, Gwinnett County Public Schools  
**Lynette Swanson**, Gwinnett Heat, Gwinnett County Public Schools  
**Kelly Richburg**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School District  
**John Bolles**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School District

### **OUTSTANDING PROGRAM AWARD (Community-Based) NOMINATIONS**

**Lachi Music**, Recording Artists and Music Professionals with Disabilities (RAMPD), New York, New York  
**Miracle League of the Okefenokee**, Ware County Recreation Department, Waycross, GA  
**The Viscardi Center's Alumni Wheelchair Basketball Coaches**, Henry Viscardi School at The Viscardi Center, Albertson, New York  
**Ed Armstrong**, Quality Living Inc., Omaha, NE

### **OUTSTANDING PROGRAM AWARD (SCHOOL-BASED) NOMINATIONS**

**Clayton Eagles**, Clayton County Public Schools  
Also honoring **Dr. Sheila Cook**, Area Coordinator; **Trina Smith**, Director of Special Education; **Coach Sebastian Tillman**  
**Georgia Storm**, Griffin RESA (Led by Henry Co. Schools)  
Also honoring **Kelli Smith**, Athletic Director, Henry Co. Schools

### **GAIL HENDRICK AWARD FOR VOLUNTEERISM NOMINATIONS**

**Mark Christmas**, BOD Member, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools  
**Marcia Payton-Edwards**, Principal-Michelle Obama STEM School, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools  
**Samuel Gonzalez**, Sign Language Interpreter, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools  
**Benito Alejandro**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools  
**Tomas Guardia**, DeKalb Silver Streaks, DeKalb County Schools  
**Jeff Jones**, Gwinnett Heat, Gwinnett County Public Schools  
**Bobby Ryals**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools  
**Noraa Smothers**, DeKalb Silver Streaks, DeKalb County Schools

### **SENIOR ATHLETE OF THE YEAR NOMINATIONS**

**Tadaisia Hillman**, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools  
**Abby Simmons**, West Georgia Wolverines, Troup County Schools

### **LESLIE SWEATMAN OFFICIAL OF THE YEAR NOMINATIONS**

**Aron Young**, AAASP League  
**Willie Long**, AAASP League  
**Donald Jacobs**, AAASP League

**MEDIA "HERO" AWARD NOMINATIONS**

**Michael Leverett** - Disability Connections, Macon, GA,  
Houston Sharks

**Jon Nelson**, Game Correspondent & Program Host, Georgia  
Public Broadcasting (GPB)

**MOST IMPROVED ATHLETE AWARD NOMINATIONS**

**Kamari "Tank" Griffin**, West GA Wolverines, Troup County  
Schools

**Paul Hart**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School District

**King James McMurry**, DeKalb Silver Streaks, DeKalb County  
Schools

**Joe Patterson**, DeKalb Silver Streaks, DeKalb County Schools

**Gary Woodruff**, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools

**POWER CHAIR ATHLETE OF THE YEAR AWARD  
NOMINATIONS**

**Caleb Merriken**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School  
District

**Ca'ron Harris**, Houston Sharks, Houston Co. Schools

**MALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR AWARD NOMINATIONS**

**Josh Cruz**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools

**Dominique Epps**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School  
District

**Austin Philip**, West GA Wolverines, Troup County Schools

**FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR AWARD NOMINATIONS**

**Taylor Nation**, West GA Wolverines, Troup County Schools

**Laila Kindness**, Houston Sharks, Houston Co. Schools

**MALE SCHOLAR ATHLETE OF THE YEAR AWARD  
NOMINATIONS**

**Anthony Cuti**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools

**FEMALE SCHOLAR ATHLETE OF THE YEAR AWARD  
NOMINATIONS**

**McCarty McGraw**, Muscogee Lions, Muscogee County School  
District

**Kila-Ray Brown**, Clayton Eagles, Clayton County Public Schools

**Ashlyn Stevens**, Houston Sharks, Houston County Schools

**FOUNDERS' AWARD FOR CAREER ACHIEVEMENT OR  
EXTRAORDINARY SERVICE**

**Robyn Hootselle**, AAASP Adapted Sports Director-GA

**Michelle Masters**, Executive Director of Adm. Services, Peach  
County Schools, GA

**Billy Mitchell**, Partner/Senior Creative Director, MLT Creative,  
Tucker, GA

**Matt Albert**, Art Director, MLT Creative, Tucker, GA

Thank you to the following 2023 AAASP ASPIRE Awards Sponsors: the Georgia Department of Education, FlagHouse, the Georgia High School Association, MLT Creative, and the AAASP Board of Directors.

Plan to join us for the event at Maggiano's Little Italy – at 5:30 pm – to celebrate the nominees and winners with us! Individual tickets are only \$40 and includes an amazing, family-style dinner at the event! (Family and team packages available as well.) Learn more at: <https://www.facebook.com/AdaptedSports> and RSVP for the event at: <https://adaptedsports.org/aaasp-aspire-awards/>.

The American Association of Adapted Sports Programs (AAASP), headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, is a not-for-profit association dedicated to developing interscholastic adapted sports programs in partnership with national, state, and local educational agencies. It represents a standardized approach to extracurricular adapted team sports and has developed one of the nation's most comprehensive school-based athletic programs for students with physical disabilities attending elementary, middle, and high school. For more information, please visit our website at <http://adaptedsports.org> or join our conversations on Twitter at: @AdaptedSports.

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