



Eastern Connecticut State University

# NEWS

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**For Immediate Release**

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## **Eastern Names Winners of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Service Awards**

**Willimantic, Conn.** – An Eastern Connecticut State University student, a professor of English at the University, and a Greater Hartford community worker were honored on Feb. 25 at Eastern’s annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Distinguished Service Awards Reception.

Star Parker, popular author and commentator on such television programming, as CNN, MSNBC and FOX News, was the guest speaker at the event, held in the Paul E. Johnson Sr. Community Conference Room in the J. Eugene Smith Library.

Student awardee Jessica Dybdahl, a senior from Storrs and Mansfield, is a member of the student organization, People Helping People, and student president of Omicron Delta Kappa, the national leadership honor society. She has been involved in several programs including Town Wide Clean-Up and Eastern’s Annual “Day of Giving.” She was also involved in voter registration for Democracy Reborn, a political event aimed at empowering, educating and enlightening Eastern students about political and social issues on a local and national level.

Her biggest project has been creating weekly trips to Lyon’s Manor, a home to 30 adult residents who have a variety of mental and physical issues. Dybdahl worked with

Willington Dial-A-Ride to bring the Lyon's Manor residents to Eastern for the Day of Giving Thanksgiving meal.

“Jess refuses to leave anyone out and believes that everyone should be treated as equals even if society has set a group up otherwise,” said Martin Sagendorf, community service coordinator at Eastern. “With her beliefs and ability to lead others to make a change, I believe that Jess embodies many of the characteristics that have made Martin Luther King Jr. the respected man he still is today.”

Meredith James, associate professor of English, received the award in the faculty/staff category. She teaches writing classes in the STEP/CAP program, tutors, and is a mentor to several students. In 2000, she revised and revamped the 200-level “Native American Literature” course. She has developed and taught courses such as “Indigenous Literature in English,” “Southwestern Literature,” and “Southern Literature.” James promotes awareness of cultural and social identity as the faculty advisor for the Native American Society and Eastern's campus chapter of the NAACP (National Association of Advancement for Colored People). She has traveled with Eastern's chapter of Habitat for Humanity on several spring break trips to teach students about others in society who are less fortunate. She is also a member of the Native Writers Circle of the Americas.

“Dr. James has enriched our curriculum and enlightened our students, not only through her teaching the literatures of people of color, but also through her teaching of ENG 100Plus, and her work in the STEP/CAP program,” said Elena Tapia, professor of linguistics and English department chair, and Rita Malenczyk, English professor and the University's writing program director, in their co-signed a letter of recommendation. “She has also worked tirelessly to ensure equal opportunity for students who come into Eastern at an academic, economic and social disadvantage.”

“Dr. James has been engaged in activities that keep the needs of underrepresented students at the forefront,” said Peter Bachiochi, psychology department chair. “She forges a bond with students that carry over long after her time with them in the classroom has finished.”

Eastern presented the community member award to Windsor resident Rufus Jones. Jones has been involved with Eastern’s student club MALES (Men Achieving Leadership Excellence and Success), and provided leadership and direction for the Dr. Martin Luther King Oratorical Contest. He has served on several boards including the Watkinson School Board; Windsor Economic Development Council; Steering Committee for Congregations United for Equality and Justice; United Way of Greater Hartford Youth Advisory Council; and the Capitol Area Substance Abuse Council. Jones has also served as chairperson of the Windsor Conversations on Race Planning Committee.

Jones is currently the president of the Beta Sigma Lambda (BSL) Education Foundation of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, a federally recognized 501c3 non-profit private foundation. Its mission is to provide educational programming and services for middle and high schools from the Greater Hartford area that will enhance students’ opportunities for academic excellence beyond high school. The BSL Education Foundation, Inc. sponsors annual services and programs including Project Alpha; Big Brothers and Big Sisters; the Leadership Development Institute; Alpha Academy; and the Annual Hartford Step OFF and Wellness Exposition.

“I can not overstate how impressed I am by Rufus’ dedication to community involvement and the great things he does for others, similar to the ideologies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.” said David Jones, community development educator at the Department of Residential Education at New York University, and Rufus Jones’ son. “He

is definitely making a major impact in our community, in addition to fulfilling his professional responsibilities at the Travelers Insurance Company.”

“As a community leader and advocate, Rufus epitomizes qualities such as determination, intellectualism, leadership, vision and moral character,” said Walter Diaz, Eastern’s director of housing and residential life. “Rufus does not allow his professional work to deter him from achieving goals to the community work and providing leadership, guidance and support to peers and the youth in the Greater Hartford community.”

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Eastern Connecticut State University is part of the Connecticut State University (CSU) system and is the state’s public liberal arts university. ECSU serves more than 5,000 students each year on its Willimantic campus.

It is the policy of Eastern Connecticut State University to ensure equal access to its events. If you are an individual with a disability and will need accommodations for this event, please contact the Office of University Relations at (860) 465-5735.

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