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## Rural Center honors rural excellence with annual awards

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## NC Leaders Earn Awards for Rural Excellence at Annual Summit

Presentations Cap Two Days of Conference Focused on "Building a Vibrant Future" in Rural North Carolina

**RALEIGH, N.C.** — The NC Rural Center presented its annual Rural Excellence Awards this week in Raleigh at the conclusion of its 2024 Rural Summit, recognizing recipients for leadership, collaboration, entrepreneurship and banking.

**Margarita Ramirez**, executive director of Centro Unido Latino Americano in Marion, was named Rural Leader of the Year. The Rural Leader of the Year award recognizes a

graduate of the Center's Rural Economic Development Institute or Homegrown Leaders programs who through strong leadership, hard work, and dedication, has enhanced the quality of life in rural North Carolina and significantly improved the community, region, and/or the state.

During her three years as executive director at Centro Unido Latino Americano, Ramirez has developed programs and resources for mental health, education access, youth development, healthcare, language justice, and food insecurity. She has also collaborated with McDowell Technical Community College and others to improve access to educational opportunities for the Latino community, including digital literacy and GED programs, early childhood development, and English as a second language classes.

**Chester Williams**, executive director of A Better Chance, A Better Community in Halifax County, won the award for Excellence in Regional Collaboration. The award recognizes a person or organization that has developed and implemented innovative collaborations across sectors and/or regions to secure a more vibrant future for people in their communities.

A Better Chance, A Better Community, or ABC2, focuses on three areas: healthy living, civic engagement, and its World Changers program for youth. As part of that work, Williams has developed a dedicated meeting space for the Northeastern North Carolina Regional Connection collaborative. He also created a resiliency hub in Scotland Neck and helped build a civic engagement network of partners who are developing a policy agenda based on the needs of people in Halifax County.

In addition to this, he continues to work closely with his World Changers on projects such as their community garden, where they learn not only how to grow food, but how to market and sell it, with the proceeds going into a scholarship fund for local students.

**Dionne G. McGee** of DG McGee Enterprises received the award for Rural Entrepreneur of the Year. The award recognizes an entrepreneur making a significant impact on the local economy through job creation, sales, and revenue generation. This person also serves as a mentor to other entrepreneurs and takes a leadership role in their community.

DG McGee Enterprises is a woman-owned project management firm specializing in customized programming. McGee also serves as cohort director of the Eastern North Carolina Entrepreneurial Promise, a program that provides instruction, coaching, mentorship and strategic advice to small businesses owned by women and minorities in underserved areas.

**Southern Bank** of Mount Olive was recognized as our Community Bank of the Year. This award is given to one of our lending partners that provides excellent customer service to North Carolina's small businesses. The winner of this award exemplifies the work of the NC Rural Center's Loan Participation Program, which reduces private lenders' loan risk to help fund the creation and expansion of small businesses throughout North Carolina. Southern Bank has been a partner of the Rural Center since 2022 and made \$5.2 million in loans through the program in that short time.

More than 630 people attended this year's sold-out Rural Summit. The event began Wednesday with Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Tony Pipa reaffirming the power and promise of rural communities. On Thursday, Dr. Jeff Cox, president of the N.C. Community College System, shared his vision for reshaping how community colleges fund and deliver its services, followed by a panel discussion among presidents of rural community colleges moderated by Dr. Zach Barricklow, associate vice president for strategy and rural innovation for the community colleges and a member of the Rural Center's board of directors.

The last main stage session of the event was a powerful panel discussion moderated by Rural Center Chief Operating Officer Carolyn Rhodes on inclusive leadership in diverse rural communities (pictured above). Executive Director Brianna Goodwin of the Robeson County Church and Community Center; Executive Director Paula Swepson of the West Marion Community Forum Inc.; and Director of Equity Dawna Ledbetter of the West Marion Community Forum Inc., each shared what drives them to take on difficult issues in their communities and how they approach that work.

North Carolina Commissioner of Agriculture Steve Troxler spoke Wednesday about how rapid growth in parts of North Carolina pressures agricultural businesses. North Carolina Secretary of Health and Human Services Kody Kinsley updated attendees Thursday on the progress of the state's recent decision to expand Medicaid to up to 600,000 more residents.

The presenting sponsor for this year's summit was North Carolina's Electric Cooperatives. Jordan Lumber & Supply, First National Bank, North Carolina Community Colleges Foundation and the Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University also sponsored the event, and more than 40 other organizations sponsored breakout sessions.

The theme of this year's summit was "Building a Vibrant Future." Each of our 12 breakout sessions and three plenary sessions focused on successful strategies to build rural communities and tied into the Rural Center's "Framework for Community Economic Development." The framework is made up of five building blocks - physical assets, business growth, social and civic vibrancy, talent development, and authentic leadership.

More than 630 people from 79 counties in North Carolina registered for the event.

#### **About the NC Rural Center**

The NC Rural Center has worked since 1987 to develop, promote, and implement sound economic strategies to improve the quality of life of rural North Carolinians. The Rural Center serves the state's 78 rural counties, with a special focus on people with low-to-moderate incomes and communities with limited resources. To learn more about how the NC Rural Center is developing and supporting rural leaders across the state, visit [www.ncruralcenter.org](http://www.ncruralcenter.org).

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Rural Center President and CEO Patrick Woodie; Rural Leader of the Year Margarita Ramirez; Rural Center Director of Leadership Training Olaunda Green; Rural Center Board of Directors Chair Phil Marion (l to r)



JaLisha Richmond, director of lending and client support at Thread Capital, a Rural Center subsidiary; Rural Entrepreneur of the Year Dionne McGee; Thread Capital Board of Directors Chair Andy Anderson (l to r)



Chester Williams as he accepts his award for Excellence in Regional Collaboration.



Representatives of Southern Bank of Mount Olive after receiving their award for Community Bank of the Year.



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