Volunteers are at the core of making the Distress Line network in Ontario strong and helping those in our communities who are feeling isolated or are in distress, crisis or experiencing suicidal thoughts. The Spirit of Volunteerism Recognition – in memory of Rev. Chad Varah – is presented to volunteers who contribute in many areas, as front line call-takers, as mentors, as fundraisers or as board members. This year we are recognizing 15 volunteers whose commitment and constant efforts and dedication have contributed significantly to the advancement of their centres, the distress line movement and the psycho-social health of Ontarians. The SOV Recognition Committee is pleased to introduce you to this year's nominees and recipients.

Please join us in congratulating this year’s Nominees & Recipients

Marlene Almeida
Spectra Community Support Services
After only a year and a half, Marlene has clocked 144 hours at Spectra where she volunteers on the distress lines and offers a non-judgemental ear and support for her callers. She provides crisis intervention and support to members of the community at risk for trauma. In her supportive efforts, Marlene is committed to enhance her supportive techniques and implement crisis tools and models to the benefit of her callers.

She is also a volunteer mentor and with her keen eye for excellence, Marlene is involved with volunteer interviews and intake. She teaches the public about Spectra’s programming and supportive services, and talks up the beauty and benefits of becoming a Spectra volunteer.

Marlene has a positive team spirit for her fellow volunteers and makes herself available for volunteer support and debriefing after difficult calls. Come bake sale time, Marlene whips up goodies for the fundraising event and shares the bounty with her fellow volunteers!

Debbie Armstrong | RECIPIENT
Distress Centre Durham
Donating six years and over 500 volunteer hours to DC Durham, Debbie spends her time on the centre’s helpline and fundraising and awareness events. As one of the centre’s best Group Leaders and shift mentors, Debbie will take time to read hundreds of call reports and send emails of praise for volunteer work well done. Volunteers feel so cared for by Debbie; she has an ability to make her peers feel proud of their work.

She’s a volunteer mentor and contributes her time to three different helplines at the centre: the 24-Hour Helpline, Pride-line Durham, and the Call-out program. With all of this going on, Debbie somehow manages to take care of her family who are undoubtedly as well taken care of as Debbie’s volunteers at DC Durham!

Linda Barrett
Distress Centre Durham
During a life transition in 2009, Debbie came to the Distress Centre Durham to help out and see if she really did want to pursue her studies in social work. She soon discovered that she not only wanted to follow this education route, but she fell in love with Distress Centre Durham and its cause.

Nicole Bolotenko, Durham’s Director of Programming and nominator, glows about Linda’s “wonderful empathy and confidence-building for her callers without judgement.”
As a volunteer mentor, Linda helps build confidence in new volunteers who are taking their first calls and often takes overnight shifts to help new volunteers worried about being at the centre overnight. At team meetings and training days, Linda helps create a friendly and positive environment, and balances cooperation, teamwork, and leadership.

### Brendan Buker
#### Distress Centre Durham

After four years volunteering for DC Durham, Brendan has donated an amazing 1000 hours and proven his loyalty to the centre. Brendan’s friendliness and fantastic sense of humour draw people to him; he is a sincere listener.

Brendan works hard in his volunteer roles: time on the phone lines, as a call-out volunteer, as a shift mentor and Group Leader, and at team meetings and centre events. Brendan is deeply empathetic and concerned for callers who in turn grow to trust him and open up to him in unique ways. As a trainer, Brendan role plays with new volunteers which allows him to truly understand and appreciate how listening to people can change their lives and better help them to cope.

In 2012, Brendan was recruited to be one of Durham’s Group Leaders and immediately displayed excellent leadership and team work skills. This initiative inspired him to create a tool to help track volunteers’ shift commitment that is easily shared with his fellow Group Leaders. His involvement in this program helps to make volunteers feel more connected to the centre, holds them more accountable to their shift commitments and most importantly, helps to significantly increase DC Durham’s coverage statistics for our helplines.

### Amanda Casinha-Ginther
#### Distress Centres Toronto – Downtown

“Amanda is everything a manager could ask for in a volunteer,” says Alex Shendelman, Program Coordinator at Distress Centres Toronto. “She is a caring, compassionate team player that brings drive and commitment all the while representing something deeply personal to her.”

Now in her fifth year of volunteering at the Distress Centres Toronto, Amanda is a peer facilitator in the Survivor Support Program (SSP), Canada’s longest-running suicide-specific bereavement program that offers peer and non-peer volunteer support to suicide and homicide survivors. Survivor program users have acknowledged the long-term impact of having Amanda in their lives and their journey.

Amazingly, Amanda exceeds the minimum volunteering requirements by a substantial margin at the Distress Centres, and also donates her time to Sick Kids Hospital and the Mood Disorders Association.

“I am a lifer,” she says, “Volunteering isn’t something I do; it is a part of who I am. I cannot remember a time when I haven’t been a volunteer.”

### Kathy Connor
#### Spectra Community Support Services

Kathy, a distress line volunteer at Spectra, is a multi-purpose volunteer who is dedicated to helping people through one-on-one conversation and listening. She’s involved in Spectra’s Spanish language programs for three years. Kathy’s involvement with Telecheck for seniors, the Reassurance and Postpartum program, and the Spanish distress line helps to enhance Spectra’s organizational vision and values based on her experience with community outreach.

Kathy assists with last-minute meetings, annual events, and helps around the office; she’s always happy and available to lend a helping hand where help is needed.

### Gloria Duarte
#### Spectra Community Support Services

Gloria is a compassionate volunteer who genuinely cares. She strives to find the right resources for each client because according to Gloria, “each client is different and unique, and has different needs”. She’s a giving volunteer always open to take hours on the Spanish distress line during the holidays or any other time she’s needed, even in last-minute situations.

As a volunteer mentor, Linda helps build confidence in new volunteers who are taking their first calls and often takes overnight shifts to help new volunteers worried about being at the centre overnight. At team meetings and training days, Linda helps create a friendly and positive environment, and balances cooperation, teamwork, and leadership.

### Jessie Herschman
#### Distress Centres Toronto – Downtown

In only a year and a half, Jessie has donated 300 volunteer hours to the phone lines, volunteer mentoring, and other centre initiatives. Jessie has a unique ability to connect with people and conveys warmth, kindness, and respect in all her interactions with callers at her centre. Jessie supports DC Toronto’s 408-Help Line, the TTC Crisis Link to help prevent subway suicides, and the PARO helpline where she assists medical residents to cope with pressures, anxieties, and crisis situations.
As a dedicated volunteer, Jessie focuses on adolescent eating disorders as a Research Volunteer at the Hospital for Sick Children; she tutors children and young adults, and has worked for a not-for-profit literacy program to help improve literacy to one of Toronto’s marginalized communities.

**Kevin Hicks | RECIPIENT**

*Distress Centre Niagara*

Distress Centre Niagara cannot say enough about Kevin Hicks. A decade-strong volunteer and senior trainer, Kevin has trained over 100 volunteers. He uses his own training technique to pass on ways to empower callers and give them emotional support. His type of training has been successful and impactful, so much so that the Distress Centre Niagara has implemented his technique in distress line training.

In between a full time job, family, and volunteer shifts, Kevin has managed to find the time to help with fundraising and volunteered to sit on Niagara’s board of directors. This year, he has been elected to board president, creating and implementing new ideas for the success of the Distress Centre Niagara.

Kevin is an inspirational role model to volunteers and staff. He insists that there is no hierarchy among volunteers and that they are all peers there to help callers. DC Niagara Volunteer Coordinator, Andrea Rennie says, “Kevin is a great reminder of what hard work, dedication, and compassion can do for our community and the Distress Centre.”

**Shirley Jennings**

*Spectra Community Support Services*

Since her start in 2012, Shirley has been an empathetic ear to many callers coping with mental health concerns, isolation, and loneliness, relationship struggles, sadness, and loss. Shirley’s sincere concern for other’s well-being comes through on each and every call she takes, whether she is speaking with a long-time caller or a new caller reaching out for the first time.

Shirley’s gentle grace offers respectful support and a sense of security to callers who feel they have no one in the world. She is a “soft place to land” for many of our callers in need of warmth and compassion.

As a volunteer mentor and trainer, Shirley’s calm and kind approach allows a safe and comfortable learning environment for new volunteers who feel nervous about taking their first call. Shirley has clocked 300 hours with Spectra, takes a regular Tuesday morning shift, and does her own mental health research outside of her volunteer time. She listens to each caller with curiosity and tries to understand their perspective and offer the best type of support.

**Vanessa Leduc**

*Spectra Community Support Services, Young Adult Volunteer*

Vanessa has a Specialized Honours Bachelor of Arts in Psychology and a certification in Sexuality Studies from York University. During her studies, she volunteered with the Sexual Assault Survivor Support Line and brought awareness of sexual assault to the campus, and also neighbouring high schools.

She brought her knowledge and enthusiasm to Spectra Community Services over two years ago and has managed to donate an amazing 328 hours of her time to her volunteer commitment to the Distress Lines. With her excellent background for distress line work, Vanessa helps callers develop their own coping strategies. She feels the pain of her callers as they open their hearts to her, and Spectra staff is encouraged by her dedication.

Beyond this, Vanessa has encouraged several of her university peers to continue their service to the distress line even after graduation and this has boosted volunteer retention at Spectra. Vanessa believes in continuing education and takes a special interest in DCO’s Learning Forums, a valuable program that she encourages new volunteers to tune in to and learn from.

**Claire Mazzolin | RECIPIENT**

*Distress Centres Toronto – North York*

Claire is the epitome of creative time management. Somehow she balances her work at the Distress Centres (where she manages to contribute between 150 and 200 hours per year, including overnight and 6 am shifts, and entertainment arrangements for the annual B.A.D. Ride fundraising event), with two part-time jobs, and a family life. She is a dedicated, cooperative, and enthusiastic volunteer.

On the phone lines, Claire is mindful of responding to callers in a holistic way and treats her callers as multifaceted individuals with their own set of unique personality traits. Above all, she responds to callers with warmth, sincere empathy and great respect. These attributes are also apparent when she responds to calls on the EMS Warm Transfer Line, where callers are typically at medium to high risk of suicide.

Claire has a diploma in psychotherapy and two years volunteer experience at the Distress Centres. As an exceptionally reliable and committed volunteer with excellent intervention skills, Claire was chosen for the Crisis Link program, the Distress Centres partnership with Bell and the TTC is a pioneering suicide prevention service for our subway system. She was also asked to be a PARO (Professional Association of Residents of Ontario) Helpline volunteer.

**Braedyn O’Rahilly | RECIPIENT**

*Distress Centre Durham, Young Adult Volunteer*

Braedyn came to DC Durham in a student placement position and just couldn’t tear herself away—she’s volunteered for 250 hours in her first year! She’s professional, mature, caring, funny, and a person that DC Durham can trust. She takes calls on the helpline; she’s a call-out volunteer, gets involved with fundraising, and helps to write Durham’s monthly newsletters.
Durham is especially appreciative of her newsletter work because it keeps volunteers up-to-date with what’s happening in the Centre, and Braedyn recognizes her fellow volunteer’s work in the publication which everyone loves to read.

She’s also a mentor, and her warm, funny, welcoming personality is fantastic for this role. Nicole Bolotenko, Durham’s Director of Programming says “Braedyn’s unique experiences as a student at the centre gives her knowledge and understanding of our centre, making her a wonderful addition to our mentorship team.” Braedyn attends and participates in team meetings, volunteer social nights, trainings, and volunteer days. She’s recognized among her peers as a volunteer leader who brings out the best in her volunteers through laughter and the development of active listening skills.

James Outos  
*Distress Centres Toronto – Scarborough*

James has an incredible ability to function under challenging and stressful situations. He has been with the Toronto Distress Centres for three years and his involvement in the centre’s programs is astonishing; he takes calls on the 408-Helpline and for four other intensive programs and is part of the centre trainer’s team.

He answers calls for Toronto Emergency Medical Services, his centre’s partner line, and provides support to callers with suicidal ideations before the ambulance arrives. James also volunteers for PARO, the Professional Association of Residents Ontario, and supports medical residents and their families through depression and anxiety, and assists those in need of acute crisis intervention. He was also chosen to be part of the Crisis Link intervention team to respond to suicide calls from TTC subway platforms.

His greatest accomplishment to date is his role in the Caller Reassurance Program for seniors. The demand of this program needs volunteers who care for it as if it is the only thing that matters. When James is in charge, no service user feels like they are a number. The program has received stellar reviews by our service users and James’ work.

Llijah Pearce  
*Toronto Distress Centres – Downtown*

Llijah has a keen interest in mental health and believes that those affected by mental health issues are particularly marginalized and often struggle with their stigmatized role in our society. He is a registered nurse who works with Toronto’s inner city population—some of the poorest, most under-served, and marginalized individuals in Canada at St. Michael’s Hospital.

He came to DC Toronto in November, 2012 in search of a challenging and rewarding volunteer position. Llijah enjoys his work on the distress lines and offers compassionate support to people suffering through crises and difficult emotional situations, and often applies his knowledge and experience of the mental health field to callers who need this type of support.

He is a valuable asset to Distress Centres Toronto and recruits friends and family to give their time to volunteer initiatives at the centre. Llijah believes that awareness and discussion of mental health will help society better understand and remove the fear and stigma from it, to put it on the same level as we do with other physical illnesses.

**Deanna Visconti**  
*Distress Centre Durham, Young Adult Volunteer*

Deanna first came to DC Durham three years ago in search of experience before she embarked in her degree in counselling psychology. Since that time, Deanna has found meaningful work in the field and has developed a fantastic reputation.

Although Deanna came to DC Durham as a Helpline Volunteer, her dedication to volunteering and the Distress Centre has inspired her to take on more roles. In three years, she has donated over 400 hours, is a shift mentor and a call-out volunteer, and participates in fundraising and awareness-raising events. As a shift mentor, Deanna nurtures new volunteers’ skills and abilities that help them work the 24-hour Helpline. She offers insightful feedback, knowledge, and kindness.

Described as “incredibly empathetic” and patient with callers, Deanna quickly builds trust and rapport with them, no matter how serious the call. She helps callers explore their options to make them feel empowered and confident, which brings about feelings of calmness and safety.

**Tiffany Wong**  
*Telephone Aid Line Kingston (TALK), Young Adult Volunteer*

Soft-spoken Tiffany is many things to TALK Kingston; within just a single year of volunteering, she’s donated 150 hours to the crisis line in several capacities.

Taking crisis calls involves active listening and crisis intervention, and in the yearly assessment of her phone abilities, Tiffany scored off the charts! In fact, she’s impressed the centre’s most experienced volunteers with her grasp of these intervention concepts. On the phone, Tiffany seeks to understand her caller’s feelings, and her open, nurturing demeanor makes callers immediately comfortable with her.

Tiffany has dedicated many hours to mentoring and training new volunteers, and is currently a team leader for TALK’s new suicide intervention training. TALK has recently made changes to their response to suicide in their callers, and Tiffany was selected to join a team of seven experienced and skillful volunteer leaders to pass on the knowledge to all of our members. In a new role of Coordinator of Quality Assurance, Tiffany volunteers for one of the most demanding roles on the Executive team, and she is dedicated to contributing all she can to TALK Kingston.