



Mission: The Olympia Historical Society and Bigelow House Museum preserves and shares the history and heritage of Olympia and the Bigelow House in a way that recognizes and values the diversity and rich cultures that gave rise to our community, is inclusive of all persons and perspectives, and informs and engages community members and visitors.

PRESS RELEASE

FROM: The Olympia Historical Society & Bigelow House Museum

RE: Annual Heritage Award Presentations and History Program at Annual Membership Meeting

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The Olympia Historical Society & Bigelow House Museum (OHS & BHM) hosted their 2024 Annual Membership Meeting on Saturday, January 27th at the Olympia Center.

At the top of the agenda was a program commemorating the 170th anniversary of the meeting of Washington's First Territorial Legislature in February, 1854. OHS & BHM Board Members recited writings from that time period that recalled life in 1850s Olympia and the workings of that first legislative session.

A highlight of the meeting was presentation of the Society's annual awards that honor significant achievements in sharing, preserving, and shaping Olympia history. It is an OHS & BHM tradition that the awards presentation be made by Gerry Alexander, the retiring Vice President of OHS & BHM and former Washington State Supreme Court Chief Justice.

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To thank Gerry Alexander for his distinguished service to OHS & BHM and to establish a lasting legacy of his long association with the organization, the Society made a surprise announcement of naming its annual heritage award program in his honor. Therefore, from this time forward, the OHS & BHM annual awards are titled: ***The Gerry L. Alexander Award for Outstanding Achievement in Heritage.***

The 2024 recipients of The Gerry L. Alexander Award for Outstanding Achievement in Heritage are:

- Toy Kay: With only an 8th grade education, Toy Kay drew upon her inner-strength and keen intelligence to re-invent her life after 33 years as a waitress at Olympia's Kay's Café. Raised in Montana by her Chinese parents, the arc of Toy's 99-year lifetime spans from a pre-arranged marriage at age 16 through a sometimes-difficult journey in post- World War II America. A degree from Evergreen State College instilled confidence that paved her way to become a civic leader in women's rights, the arts, education, and more. Toy has been a major force in the Zonta Club and she mentored southeast Asian refugees. Always proud of her Chinese heritage, she founded the Olympia Chinese Community Association to sustain that history and culture.
- South Sound for Senior Services (SSSS): In 2023, this non-profit organization celebrated 50 years of providing low or no-cost services for South Sound senior citizens. Through the decades, SSSS has provided thousands of free meals, transportation, recreation, and camaraderie to their guests at senior centers in Lacey, Mason County, and downtown Olympia.
- Olympia's Hidden Histories Walking Tours: In 2022 and 2023, Evergreen State College students and faculty conducted extensive research into Olympia history to produce six on-line walking tours that focus on downtown Olympia and its waterfront. Accessible from any laptop, smartphone, or iPad, these tours explore local histories and make them available to the public. Each tour is also visually engaging through maps, photos, and video clips. To enjoy the tours, go to:
<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/collections/>.

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- Lincoln Elementary School: Over the past year, Lincoln Elementary School and Options program celebrated the school building's centennial. Designed by prominent Olympia architect Joseph Wohleb, the building was threatened with demolition in the 1990s, but was saved from the wrecking ball as a result of advocacy by parents, students, and teachers. At the presentation, Lincoln School Principal Marcela Abadi gave Gerry Alexander a T- shirt created by students especially for the school's centennial.
- Avanti High School (formerly Washington Elementary School): As with Lincoln, Avanti High School was designed in the 1920s by Joseph Wohleb in his signature Spanish Colonial Revival style. Recently, Avanti benefitted from a \$13 million rehabilitation project that preserved the building's historic character while transforming the inside to a 21st Century learning campus.
- Squaxin Park: Though not presented at the meeting, an announcement was made during the ceremony about an award to be made jointly to the City of Olympia and Squaxin Island Tribe. The award honors the 2021 signing of the Accord between the Tribe and City of Olympia that resulted in the renaming of Squaxin Park in 2022. The award is to be formally presented to Olympia City Council on March 5, 2024 and to the Squaxin Island Tribal Council at a date to be determined.

In addition to the award recipients described above, a Special Achievement award was made to Gerry Alexander for his long-time involvement with the Olympia Historical Society & Bigelow House Museum as well as local and statewide historic preservation efforts. In his parting words, Alexander said his fondest wish is to see the establishment of a museum displaying Olympia heritage.

As well as his passion for history and historic preservation, Alexander is noted for his term as Washington State Supreme Court Justice and following as Supreme Court Chief Justice, serving in that position from 2001 until retiring in 2010.

The OHS & BHM also honored retiring Board Member Denise Halloran, departing Board Member Sue Lean, and Volunteer of the Year Craig Swalling, all for their

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generous support of the society's mission and programming. Society members also elected two new board members: Vickie MacMillan and Jill Rosencrantz. Biographies for MacMillan and Rosencrantz as well as all board members can viewed at: <https://olympiahistory.org/category/board-members/>.

Our thanks go to the Washington Secretary of State's State Archives Division for their support of the OHS & BHM Annual Meeting.

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