

# REALTOR

MAGAZINE.REALTOR



## The Power of Water

Good Neighbor Award Winner  
Elias Thomas



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION of REALTORS

# When Giving

## Meet 10 REALTORS® who make us grateful.

By Sara Geimer

REALTORS® step up. They're problem solvers. They're stop-talking-about-it-and-start-doing-it types. And each year, the National Association of REALTORS® Good Neighbor Awards spotlights great exemplars of that can-do spirit, whether their goal is alleviating homelessness, bringing clean water to parched villages, alleviating chronic hunger, or giving a leg up or moments of joy to others in need. Through the Good Neighbor Awards, we recognize and support the works of 10 honorees each year. Those they serve have shared with us stories of profound thanks. But gratitude works both ways. These Good Neighbors say giving is a gift in its own right. The *opportunity* to serve others is reason enough to feel grateful. They step up for a deceptively simple reason: because they can. **See their full stories and videos at [nar.realtor/gna](http://nar.realtor/gna).**



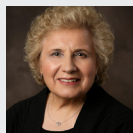
**Omayra Borges** jumped in to save lives after Puerto Rico's storm. **Page 4**



**Elias Thomas** has worked to make clean water available to thousands in India. **Page 6**

## Honorable Mentions

From hundreds of nominations, we selected five more REALTORS® who make a difference through passionate volunteer work. They will each receive \$2,500 grants for their charities. Read their full profiles at [realtorm.ag/hon-mentions](http://realtorm.ag/hon-mentions).



**ANNETTE EVANS** Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices New Jersey Properties, Livingston, N.J. Evans

has spent 30 years as a volunteer board member at JESPY House, a nonprofit advancing indepen-

dence for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She has taken on multiple roles, including helping parents prepare for their adult



children to age in place. **NECIA T. FREEMAN** ABR, CRS, Old Colony, REALTORS®, of Huntington, Barboursville,

W.V. Freeman founded Backpacks & Brown Bags to feed children who do not reliably have food



on the weekends and to help opioid-addicted women, some of whom are these children's mothers, find a path to recovery.

# Is a Gift



**Chet Choman** provides shelter and support for the rural poor. **Page 8**



**Jeremy Lichtenstein** ensures that kids have enough to eat on the weekend. **Page 10**



**Joy Nelson** offers a bucolic getaway for people with a range of disabilities. **Page 12**

**RICHARD L. HARRIS** CCIM, Richard Harris & Associates Inc., Palm Harbor, Fla. Harris is volunteer president of The Arc Tampa Bay, which empowers people of all ages with intellectual and developmental disabilities. His business expertise helped the nonprofit reduce costs, increase revenue, and obtain grants to extend its reach.



**MICHAEL LAFARGUE** Coldwell Banker Residential, Chicago LaFargue is a powerhouse in multiple nonprofits supporting Chicago neighborhoods. He championed the installation of community

security cameras, which led to arrests in the murder of a local judge. He also heads a community-based coalition that seeks to ensure that a



5-mile train route expansion benefits underserved areas.  
**JACK PERSIN** Baird & Warner, Naperville, Ill. Persin

co-founded Naperville Responds for Veterans, a nonprofit that helps low- and moderate-income veterans remain in their home as they age. The organization has helped nearly 200 veterans, making crucial home repairs and adding retrofits like wheelchair ramps.

## 2018 Web Choice

Although the Good Neighbor Awards judges (page 14) selected our 2018 winners, all 10 finalists competed for “Web Choice” honors through public voting online. This year, a record 165,000 votes were cast. Congratulations



to top vote-getters Michael LaFargue, Necia T. Freeman, and Joy Nelson, who receive bonus grants thanks to sponsor realtor.com®.

# The Power of Water

By building dams in India, Elias Thomas improves living standards in remote villages. BY GRAHAM WOOD

REALTOR® Elias Thomas calls it the “forgotten place.” But a discovery of sorts is happening amid the shantytowns along India’s northern border, where some of the nation’s poorest residents endure 120-degree summers without electricity or clean water. Thanks to Thomas’s pioneering volunteer efforts, they’re forging a new way of life, with access to fresh water not only for drinking but also to support agriculture.

It’s the crowning achievement for Thomas, broker-owner of EXIT Key Real Estate in Shapleigh, Maine, who has spent 40 years fundraising and volunteering both at home and abroad with Rotary International, one of the world’s largest charities. He began with his local chapter, helping to build meditation gardens for the mentally ill and offering job hunting and housing assistance to newly released prison inmates.

In 2001, Thomas traveled to India with Rotary International as part of a team with a mission to immunize children against polio, a crippling disease that had reached a crisis level there. Living conditions were deplorable—Thomas remembers children playing marbles in puddles of urine. He was convinced that India was where his work was most needed.

Since then, Thomas has returned to India annually, organizing teams of eight to 80 volunteers and personally immunizing about 500 children. He also raised \$40,000—just a slice of the more than \$350,000 he’s raised for Rotary International over his volunteer career—to help pay for the corrective surgeries of some 1,000 polio victims.

Roger Schulte, a Rotarian from Upland, Calif., who traveled to India with Thomas in 2008, remembers how Thomas’s commitment inspired the team. “Elias has deep faith that we can bring about change,” Schulte says. “He’s a man with dreams, and while most people talk about what they wish they could do to help others, he does it.”

## **Seizing the Chance to Change Lives**

Another dire situation came to Thomas’s attention in 2008. His friend, Sanjiv Saran, an Indian native and fellow Rotarian who has volunteered with Thomas since 2002, told him of the desperate desert communities in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan. Clean water is so scarce there that residents were forced to wash dishes and clothing in wells, polluting their drinking water. “I immediately thought of Elias to help these people because I can be dead sure he will see any project through,” Saran says.

Thomas assembled an initial team of 78 volunteers from eight countries and coordinated with village councils to devise a solution. They created a plan to build dams to capture the runoff from monsoons, providing a basin for drinking water and irrigation. But with no machinery available, the dams had to be built by hand. For the past 10 years, Thomas has led volunteers—a total of 350 from all over the world—through an annual process of digging the holes, lining them with membranes to hold the water, and building out the dams. They’ve built nine dams serving more than 45,000 residents, each one spanning about half a football field. Locals completed the construction work after Thomas and his volunteers returned home. Each dam has taken from six months to a year to complete.

The impact is dramatic: After the first dam was finished in 2010, “everything was green where it used to be brown and dusty,” Thomas says. “The hills were lush, and waterfowl moved in.” Now that water is accessible, children have more time to attend school rather than fetch water from distant locations, parents can do chores safely, and crops are more plentiful, which boosts the area’s economy.

ROTARY INTERNATIONAL  
Built nine dams that deliver water to 45,000 villagers | [rotary.org](http://rotary.org)  
Contact Elias Thomas at [elias@exitkeyrealestate.com](mailto:elias@exitkeyrealestate.com) to learn more



“When we bring water to remote villages, women and girls become more independent because they don’t have to walk miles each day carrying jugs of water.”



## About the program

NAR's Good Neighbor Awards is celebrating its 19th year of honoring REALTORS® who make an extraordinary impact through volunteer work. Since 2000, the Good Neighbor program has donated more than \$1.1 million to REALTOR®-led charities. The five 2018 Good Neighbor Award winners will be honored in November during the REALTORS® Conference & Expo in Boston. The winners' charities will each receive a \$10,000 grant. In addition to the winners, five Honorable Mentions will each receive \$2,500 for their community cause. We choose the Good Neighbor Award winners through a multistage judging process. Then the public votes to choose which of the 10 finalists receive bonus grant money as Web Choice Favorites. This year, more than 165,000 votes were cast. Nominations open in January for the 2019 Good Neighbor Awards. Deadline is May 10. Find out more at [realtorm.ag/gna](http://realtorm.ag/gna).

## Thank you, judges

**Martin Edwards** NAR Past President | **Shannon L. King** NAR Member Communications Chair | **Vince Malta** NAR First Vice President | **Veronica C. Malolos** NAR Housing Opportunities Chair | **Stacey Moncrieff** Vice President, NAR Business Communications & Publishing | **Suzanne Mueller** SVP of Industry Relations, Move Inc. and realtor.com | **Ron Phipps** NAR Past President (and 2001 Good Neighbor Honorable Mention) | **Thomas Riley** NAR Treasurer | **John Smaby** NAR President-elect | **Martin Sundquist** SVP of Customer & Community Programs, Wells Fargo Home Mortgage

## Thank you, sponsors

Since 2000, the Good Neighbor Awards has donated more than \$1.1 million to REALTOR®-led charities. Those grants—and REALTOR® Magazine's Good Neighbor program itself—wouldn't be possible without the generous support of its sponsors: realtor.com® and Wells Fargo.

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# Are you a Good Neighbor?

Or do you know someone who should be nominated? Visit [nar.realtor/gna](http://nar.realtor/gna) to nominate someone for the 2019 awards (deadline for entries: May 10) or to contribute to current and past winners' charities.



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