

REALTOR

MAGAZINE.REALTOR



After an Island Tragedy

Good Neighbor Award Winner Omayra Borges



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.**



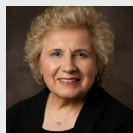
Omayra Borges jumped in to save lives after Puerto Rico's storm. **Page 4**



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

Honorable Mentions

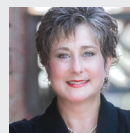
From hundreds of nominations, we selected five more REALTORS® who make a difference through passionate volunteer work. They will each receive \$2,500 grants for their charities. Read their full profiles at realtorm.ag/hon-mentions.



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

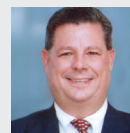
has spent 30 years as a volunteer board member at JESPY House, a nonprofit advancing indepen-

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®.

OMAYRA BORGES

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“We have been through hurricanes before, but Maria was different: stronger, louder, and more destructive.”



After an Island Tragedy

Omayra Borges risked her own life to rescue storm victims of Hurricane Maria. BY WILMA GONZALEZ

REALTOR® Omayra Borges remembers the sound of the heavy winds and rain as the walls of her condo began pulsing. Then the glass from her windows crashed to the floor, and rain poured quickly into her concrete building. It was Sept. 20, 2017—the day Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico.

Even in the heat of the moment, Borges worried not for her own safety but for the well-being of the island's inhabitants. Maria tore through the center of Puerto Rico, destroying electrical towers and crippling 95 percent of the island. Most of the 3.3 million residents were left without power, and emergency services were unreachable. "We have been through hurricanes before, but Maria was different: stronger, louder, and more destructive," says Borges.

Borges saw shredded structures and buildings that were sliced in half like open-top dollhouses. A car, whipped by the winds, landed upside-down next to her home. While many shell-shocked residents hunkered down in their damaged homes, Borges had the opposite response: "I have to help rescue my people. I know this island like the back of my hand," she says, reflecting on Maria's immediate aftermath.

After the winds calmed, Borges began walking through the filthy floodwaters, knowing people needed help. Men, women, and children were crying, clutching framed family photos and begging for someone to help them find their loved ones. One thing Borges knew for sure was that essential resources like fuel and drinking water would not come quickly enough. The

impassable roads would make transportation difficult. "My [initial] focus was to figure out what information needed to be communicated and to whom," says Borges.

She discovered a few people with cell service. "I collected phone numbers, and I asked random strangers to help me let the families know we are alive," she says. She couldn't stop thinking about the sick, elderly, and disabled, especially those living in remote mountain villages. "My immediate reaction was to use my volunteering expertise along with my 19 years as a REALTOR® to begin the recovery process."

Well before Maria hit, Borges had already logged two decades as a volunteer for projects focused on helping cancer patients, pediatric hospitals, and the homeless. Borges founded Run Like a Lola, an annual 5K and 10K half-marathon, which, in 2017, involved 600 volunteers and raised more than \$10,000 for the pediatric oncology unit of Hospital Pediátrico.

Hope for Recovery

Within a few weeks of the storm, Borges met someone via Facebook who would become an important partner. Wilson Santiago-Burgos, then an adjunct professor in environmental sciences at Universidad del Turabo, was also leading hurricane recovery efforts. By December of 2017, the two had co-founded the nonprofit Fundación Mochileando 100x35 for hurricane relief. "Omayra identifies the hardest-hit communities and engages with community leaders," says Santiago-Burgos. "When you have the leaders with you, then you can help the community better." The group has received more than \$1.1 million in cash and donated goods, repaired 600 homes, and helped 45,000 people. Borges, Santiago-Burgos, and other volunteers would drive together to the mountains every couple of days, navigating around landslides and blocked roads. They became a crucial lifeline for remote residents.

A year after Maria struck the island, the foundation's work continues. Houses are still being repaired and rebuilt. Borges is determined to make these homes more resilient—to reduce the harm to buildings and people when the next storm arrives.



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.

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 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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