



GRIFFIN



THE 2025 CWEA RENAISSANCE AND POLK AWARDS WINNERS

BY ABBY WOJCIK

The Polk Award: James Whyte

The CWEA awarded James Whyte the Polk Award for his dedication to service, leadership and community safety. As the executive director of the CWE Neighborhood Security Initiative, Whyte is recognized for his distinguished 20-year career in law enforcement, service in the United States Marine Corps, and being a proud St. Louisan.

The Polk Award acknowledges the positive impact, consistent leadership and long-lasting commitment of individuals in the CWE community.

Whyte has directed the CWE Neighborhood Security Initiative with a mission to enhance neighborhood safety and advancement, contributing to the common good. Under his leadership, the NSI expanded its regional camera network to over 700 cameras across 10 taxing districts. He assisted police with

numerous successful investigations and grew the local organization from two to six employees.

“It’s the best job ever,” Whyte said. “I don’t even call it a job. When you’re excited enough to go into work everyday, that’s a blessing.”

Whyte is president of both the St. Louis Regional Crime Commission and the Regional Crimestoppers. He’s a member of the Patriot Guard Riders and the St. Louis Police Veterans Association, while also finding time to volunteer with the Focus Marines Foundation.

Whyte thanked his wife, Lori, of 33 years, as well as his entire NSI staff in his acceptance speech.

“I’m grateful for all the people in my life, and I’m grateful for this award,” Whyte said.

The Renaissance Awards:

Three businesses in the historic Gaslight Square District are recipients of this year’s Renaissance



Lindsey Tsvetanov (left) presents the Polk Award to James Whyte.

Award, an honor intended for organizations that positively impact the CWE neighborhood.

Blue Strawberry, Jim Dolan

Jim Dolan opened the 100-seat intimate Blue Strawberry theater on North Boyle Avenue four months

before the pandemic lockdowns. Navigating a challenging entertainment and economic landscape, Blue Strawberry now consistently hosts live music almost every night of the week. The theater presents over 350

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THE MANY TALENTS OF HAIR CUTTER JASON EVANS

BY NICKI DWYER

Jason Evans has been cutting hair in his salon at 4902 McPherson Ave., next to Left Bank Books, for 51 years. Jason Evans Hair is the oldest business in the CWE, though the proprietor looks nowhere close to his 71 years on the planet.

Evans, who grew up in Ferguson, is a high school drop out. He had planned to go into medicine, in-

spired by his grandfather, who was a surgeon and chief of staff at St. Luke’s Hospital, and his grandmother, who was head of nursing. When he was 14 he started volunteering at Christian Northwest Hospital. “I loved being a candy striper, working primarily in radiology, filling x-ray canisters, etc. I assumed they’d give me the job when I was 15, but that didn’t happen.” Meanwhile, there were 1,600 in his high school class, and the education, he said, “wasn’t great, so I left in junior year.”

His mother said that if he wasn’t going to finish high school, he’d have to learn a trade. He reluctantly enrolled in Jack LaPlante Beauty School with his best friend. “I had no interest but my mom told me to just get the piece of paper and that would allow me to work anywhere in the world. I was terribly shy, and beauty school forced me to really deal with people, which turned out to be a good thing.”

Evans had a sixth sense about how changes in lifestyle in the early 70s would affect the beauty business. When he was learning the trade he was taught to cut hair with a razor, which made it easier to wrap hair around curlers. But women were going to work outside the home and looking for ‘wash and wear’ hair. Evans knew that cutting hair with scissors would lead to a different outcome for the long, heavy hair that was popular then. Fresh out of beauty school he went to work at Trimmers in River Roads where they were training stylists to cut hair this way.

“I learned how to do a ‘Farrah Fawcett’ layered cut, which meant clients no longer needed to sit under dryers or get perms.” He and another stylist at Trimmers, who did the same 15-minute haircut and blow dry, soon found that all the women sitting under dryers for hours eventually wound up in their chairs.



Jason Evans Photo by Linda Eyerma

Corner Cuts

A photo of Jason Evans from a long-ago issue of the West End Word.

At age 19, Evans opened his first business, Corner Cuts, in his current location, where his mother

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Noteworthy Café opens near Jackson Pianos

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Symphony returns to renovated Powell Hall

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“Delish on Delmar” dishes

AWARDS *From Page 1*

shows a year, welcoming tourists from all over to the neighborhood.

“Our little corner of North Boyle and the eastern readout of the CWE plays, I believe, an outsized role in the music and theater life of our city, which is already blessed by so much outstanding music and theater,” Dolan said.

In 2025, Blue Strawberry has welcomed nine Grammy Award winners, two Tony Award winners and countless more award nominees to their stage. Two years before Samara Joy won Best New Artist at the Grammys, Blue Strawberry was her first show outside of NYC. Dolan is grateful to his wife, Cindy Kohlbry, for putting up with so many working nights away. He also thanks his staff for helping make it all happen and the CWEA for the recognition.

Black Mountain Wine House, Joe Baker

Black Mountain Wine House is the second location of the original in Brooklyn, where operating owner Joe Baker met Tyler Maganzini 12 years ago. The pair then launched

this sought-after wine and bottle house destination in Baker’s home in St. Louis in 2023.

Baker has worked in restaurants across major cities like Seattle, Los Angeles, New York and Denver. His passion for wine is rooted in connection rather than formality, and he celebrates wine as a way to tell stories and bring people together. The cozy bottle shop alludes an unpretentious atmosphere ideal for both wine connoisseurs or those new to the world of spirits.

Black Mountain Wine House reflects Baker’s belief that wine should be an accessible and enjoyable experience for everyone.

As Baker was unable to attend the ceremony, CWEA Vice President Becca Vossmeier accepted the award on Baker’s behalf. “This is a part of the CWE that I think is so integral to the growth of the community, and as we’ve discussed this evening, it’s something that is important to this area,” Vossmeier said.

St. Louis Actors’ Studio, William Roth

Founder and Artistic Director of St. Louis Actors’ Studio, as well as

a working actor in theater for over 35 years, William Roth has been a lifelong CWE resident. He started his own graphic design firm, The Eleven, and then bought a decaying property near Gaslight Square as an office in 2004.

Roth rented the surplus commercial property in the building through his development company Roth Investments LLC. Retailers like Serenity Hair Salon and Blue Strawberry gravitated to the newly renovated spaces, eager to bring life into this stretch of the neighborhood.

Roth then had the initiative to buy and renovate the decrepit building next to his in order to help the surrounding area look beautiful and inviting. This foresight brought in the tenants Aileem Dance Co., Black Mountain and The Gaslight Theater. He never imagined his entrepreneurial efforts would lead to the building of The Gaslight Theater, which now serves as a home for St. Louis Actors’ Studio.

“My vision was to build spaces for artists to create as they stand on the broad shoulders of the Gaslight Square celebrities of the 1950s-70s,” Roth said in a statement. “Now in its 18th season, St. Louis Actors’ Studio and the Gaslight Theater continue to thrive (having produced over 90 plays, live music and dance), as does my Graphic design firm, The Eleven Inc.”

Tornado Recovery

The CWEA also gave special recognition to individuals who gave tireless efforts to help the community recover from the May 16th tornado: Ali Rand, Justin Rand, Carol Lehnhoff-Bell, Wesley Klause and Danni Eickenhorst.

Danni Eickenhorst, CEO of HUSTL Hospitality and owner of



Winner Danni Eickenhorst talks with Alderman Michael Browning.

several restaurants, was present at the Awards Ceremony to accept a bouquet of flowers and be applauded for her dedication to the city and what it means to be a caring neighbor.

Some of Eickenhorst’s restaurants, including Steve’s Hot Dogs experienced damage from the May 16 tornado. In the wake of the storm, she brought together resources for serving 750 meals and gave out hundreds of bags of groceries. With the Delmar Maker’s District, she also raised over \$100,000 for other affected businesses through the successful concert and block party fundraiser at Steve’s Hot Dogs’ grand re-opening.

“I just want to ask you guys to keep supporting that district,” Eickenhorst said. “[Businesses] are looking at a really long journey, not all of us are going to make it to the other side, but we all still believe in that neighborhood and we all want really good things to happen for that community. So get out there as much as you can here and over there and support the business because they support the families in this neighborhood, they employ the families in these neighborhoods, and they’re going to be the people to get us to the other side.”



Laura Stefack SLAC (front left) with CWEA board members.

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