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Medal of Honor Celebrates Contributions of Four Recipients

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Medal of Honor Celebrates Contributions of Four Recipients

Quick Facts

- Oct. 24 ceremony will honor Johnny King, Vivian Ayers, Philip Simmons and Michael Marsicano.
- Event includes scholarship presentation.



Johnny King

ROCK HILL, S.C. - Winthrop University will recognize the contributions of a long-time guitarist, a Pulitzer poetry nominee, a prolific blacksmith and a prominent arts advocate during a special evening on Oct. 24.

The **Medal of Honor in the Arts** will honor this year's recipients: **Johnny King** of Rock Hill, S.C.; **Vivian Ayers** of Chester, S.C.; **Philip Simmons** of Charleston, S.C.; and **Michael Marsicano** of Charlotte, N.C.



Vivian Ayers

Each will be given a hand-crafted medal made by former arts professor Alf Ward in what is the most prestigious award granted by the College of Visual and Performing Arts. This is the seventh year for the awards ceremony, which is by invitation only. A Medal of Honor scholarship also will be presented during the evening, along with performances by faculty and students.

Previous recipients have represented a cross section of the arts: designers, musicians, arts educators, philanthropists, playwrights, and others whose work through the years has made a lasting impression.

Here are **biographies** of each of the recipients:



Philip Simmons

* **As long as he can remember**, there has been music in **Johnny King's** life.

The Rock Hill native fiddled with the guitar in his early years but didn't start playing seriously until high school when a friend made King a guitar out of cat-gut fishing string.

A musician now for 50 years, King has traveled the world playing music. He moved to New York with relatives in the late 1960s, and then joined the Bill Doggett Band, known for its hit "Honky Tonk." A few years later, he and his friends put together the Fatback Band. The funk and disco group, which recorded numerous albums and one gold album, now has a Web site and several YouTube videos.



Michael Marsicano

Some of King's best memories involve opening his first guitar school in 1975 in St. Albans, N.Y. He returned to Rock Hill where he has operated an electronics shop for 18 years, as well as a Gospel recording studio for young musicians.

Eager to recognize other musicians' contributions, King helped form the Rock Hill Musicians Club. The group has celebrated other Rock Hill musicians' work through performances and establishment of a park. King continues to play with a combo of Winthrop faculty members for area events, and he says, "The music is stronger than ever."

* **Born into a family of educators** in Chester, S.C., **Vivian Ayers** has spent her life embracing languages and their relationship with the arts.

One of her most treasured accomplishments was a Pulitzer nomination in 1952 for her poetry. In the late 1950's, her poem, "Hawk," attracted the attention of NASA and for 20 years was the only poetry celebrated by NASA. Trained as a librarian at Rice University, Ayers was granted faculty status in 1965, becoming the first African American to do so. During her years at Rice, she organized and published *The Adept Quarterly*, an important contribution to the small publications movement of the time.

In 1972, her work, "Workshops in Open Fields," was hailed and recommended to the nation as a "prototype of grassroots programming" by the director of the National Endowment of the Arts. Ayers established the Adept New American Museum - a museum for art and history of the American Southwest. While at Rice, she began studying Classical Greek and continued her training at three other prominent universities, as well intensive study of the Mayan culture, particularly in math and astronomy.

Ayers reared a successful family, with three of her children going into the performing arts - jazz musician Tex Allen, Tony-award winning actress Phylicia Rashad and famed dancer Debbie Allen. Her youngest sister is former Rep. Bessie Moody-Lawrence, one of the first African-Americans to earn tenure at Winthrop.

Ayers discovered that through learning Spanish, she could read about early American culture, which increased her proficiency in programming arts, science and culture. "As an activist, I believe that the creative process is irreversible and unyielding as a force of enlightenment and change."

* **On the way to Buist School** in downtown Charleston, a young **Philip Simmons** became intrigued with the ironwork in his community. His curiosity led him to visit the blacksmith shops, pipefitters, shipwrights, coppers and other craftsmen who serviced the nearby waterfront businesses.

Simmons, now the most celebrated of Charleston ironworkers, received his most important education from local blacksmith Peter Simmons, who ran a busy shop at the foot of Calhoun Street. Here he learned the values and refined the talents that would sustain him throughout his long metalworking career.

Moving into the specialized fields of ornamental iron in 1938, Simmons fashioned more than 500 decorative pieces of ornamental wrought iron: gates, fences, balconies and window grills. From end to end, downtown Charleston is truly decorated by his hand.

In 1982, the National Endowment for the Arts awarded him its National Heritage Fellowship, the highest honor that the United States can bestow on a traditional artist. The S.C. Legislature followed with a "lifetime achievement" and commissions for public sculptures by the South Carolina State Museum and the city of Charleston.

Pieces of his work have been acquired by the National Museum of American History and Smithsonian Institution, among others. His downtown church, St. John's Reformed Episcopal Church, has dedicated its grounds with a commemorative landscaped garden as a tribute.

Simons has lived on the east side of Charleston since arriving from Daniel Island in 1919. He oversees his relatives and others who are the next generation to work as blacksmiths.

* **Earlier this year**, the Charlotte Chamber of Commerce handed out its innovator of the year for the city of Charlotte. The winner: **Michael Marsicano**.

He won earlier awards for building economic empowerment and bridging racial divides from the Urban League of Central Carolinas, as one of the city's most influential leaders from *Charlotte Magazine*, and for his philanthropic commitment to the Latino community. For the past two years, Marsicano has been invited to the Sundance Preserve with about 30 other public and private sector leaders to explore national arts policy issues.

As president and CEO of the Foundation of the Carolinas since 1999, Marsicano oversees a 50-person staff and a \$5.8 million annual budget. His organization administers more than 1,700 funds, including support for foundations such as the Foundation for the Arts & Sciences, the United Way Legacy Foundation and Foundation for the Charlotte Jewish Community.

In recent years, the foundation has launched four centers of philanthropy, reorganized its organization, spearheaded community initiatives concerning workforce displacement, children and greenways, and acquired a new headquarters. Its funding priorities are civic engagement and race/ethnic relations, youth development and the environment.

Marsicano previously worked as president and CEO of the Arts & Science Council and as executive director of the Durham Arts Council/Royall Arts Center. He holds a doctorate degree in public policy sciences, a master's degree in counseling psychology and a psychology degree, all from Duke University.

Living in New York with great access to cultural opportunities, Marsicano's parents took care in exposing him to all art forms at an early age. He gravitated towards music and grew up playing the clarinet, saxophone, oboe and English horn. A defining experience was Marsicano's semester study of music in Vienna, Austria and a tour of Europe as a student performer with the Duke University Orchestra. He came home from abroad with a passion to pursue the arts as central to his professional and vocational careers.

For more information, contact Amanda Woolwine, director of the Office of Special Projects, at 803/323-2399.

[\[Back to Previous Page\]](#)

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Arts	Directory	Family Programs	Majors & More	Residence Life	Wingspan