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El Pomar Foundation Honors Colorado Nonprofits and Leaders at Night of Excellence Ceremony

Colorado Springs, CO – October 22, 2026 – Three nonprofit organizations and three individuals from around the state were honored by El Pomar Foundation with Awards for Excellence during its 2026 Night of Excellence celebration at The Broadmoor on Friday, October 16.

The organizations honored were **Third Way Center, Inc., Valley Settlement, and Children's Advocacy Center for the Pikes Peak Region, Inc.** The individuals honored for their lifetime achievements and outstanding contributions to the nonprofit sector were **Gina Solazzi, Bob Chastain, and Shirley Martinez.**
Awards for Excellence were accompanied by $100,000 grants for each organization. Each individual honoree received $25,000 to be directed toward the nonprofit of their choice.

"Awards for Excellence are a meaningful way for El Pomar's Trustees to highlight and recognize organizations and individuals for their extraordinary service and support of communities around Colorado," said El Pomar President and CEO, Kyle H. Hybl. "Through this celebration, acknowledgment, and the accompanying grant funding, we are pleased to thank and recognize them for their work."

AWARDS FOR EXCELLENCE HONOREES

Third Way Center, Inc., located in Denver, received the Ben S. **Wendelken Award for Excellence (Human Services).** Third Way Center is dedicated to offering truth and hope to adolescents and their families facing complex mental health challenges across Colorado. Founded in 1970, the organization was created in response to a critical community need: an alternative to homelessness, institutionalization, and incarceration for youth experiencing trauma, instability, and untreated mental illness. Through a comprehensive continuum of care, Third Way Center meets young people where they are and supports them through both crisis and long-term healing. Its programs include trauma-informed residential treatment, individual and family therapy, accredited alternative education, vocational and life-skills training, and transitional and aftercare services. All their programs are delivered in safe, structured, home-like environments with around-the-clock support.

Valley Settlement, located in Silt, received the **Rural Award for Excellence.** Valley Settlement is dedicated to working alongside Latina families in Colorado's Roaring Fork Valley to create opportunities for learning, connection, and long-term stability. Founded in 2011 through an extensive community-led listening process, Valley Settlement was built on relationships, cultural belonging, and a shared commitment to reducing systematic barriers faced by Spanish-speaking families. Using a two-generation (2Gen) approach, Valley Settlement supports both children and adults through a network of six community-designated programs focused on early childhood education, adult learning, family engagement, and access to essential resources. These programs recognize parents as their children's first and most important teachers while strengthening the skills, confidence, and leadership of the entire household.

Children's Advocacy Center for the Pikes Peak Region, Inc. dba Safe Passage, located in Colorado Springs, received the **Pikes Peak Award for Excellence**. Safe Passage is a trusted, mission-driven nonprofit dedicated to giving abused children a voice and supporting their healing journey with compassion and dignity. Founded in 1994, Safe Passage was created in response to a critical community need: a single, child-focused place where victims of physical or sexual abuse, or those who witness violent crime, could receive support without being traumatized by the systems designated to protect them. As Colorado's only fully co-located Children's Advocacy Center, Safe Passage brings together law enforcement, child protection, specialized medical providers, mental health professionals, prosecutors, and victim advocates in one welcoming, child-friendly location. This multidisciplinary model minimizes the number of interviews a child must endure, streamlines investigations, and ensures families receive comprehensive forensic and healing services at no cost. Each year, Safe Passage serves more than 1,400 children and caregivers across the Pikes Peak region.

Gina Solazzi received the **Russell T. Tutt Leadership and Service Award** which, named for a former El Pomar Trustee, honors a Colorado Nonprofit Executive Director or Board Chair who has demonstrated excellence in their work. Gina Solazzi is a nonprofit leader whose career reflects a deep belief in education as the foundation for lifelong opportunity. Raised in Hardin, Montana, Gina developed an early work ethic shaped by responsibility, independence, and service. From local jobs and summer swim instruction to serving as a page in the Montana State Legislature, these formative experiences instilled a lasting commitment to community engagement and personal accountability. Education has always been central to Gina's values. She earned a liberal arts degree from Carleton College in Minnesota and later completed a master's degree in Exercise Physiology at the University of Oregon. Her interdisciplinary academic background fostered a holistic understanding of child development, learning, and the systems that support long-term success. After moving to Colorado Springs with her husband, Gregg Braha, Gina co-founded Pasta di Solazzi, a family-owned restaurant that became a beloved community gathering place for more than two decades. The restaurant served as both a livelihood and a hub for connection while Gina and Gregg raised their three daughters. For the past 23 years, Gina has served as Executive Director of the Children's Literacy Center (CLC), originally founded as a Junior League project in 1991. Under her leadership, CLC has grown from a single location into a statewide organization serving more than 600 students annually at 15 sites across Colorado. CLC provides free, one-to-one tutoring for elementary students reading below grade level, using the research-based Peak Reader curriculum delivered by trained community volunteers. The program boasts a 95 percent success rate, helping children build strong phonetic skills, confidence, and a lasting love of reading.

Bob Chastain received the **Spencer Penrose Award** which honors an individual who has made significant strides in addressing social and/or economic challenges through innovative solutions. Bob Chastain is a visionary zoological leader whose career blended animal welfare, conservation leadership, and community engagement. He served nearly three decades at Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, including 21 years as President and CEO from 2005 to 2026. Beginning his career at the Zoo as a horticulturist, Bob's deep understanding of both the natural world and organizational leadership shaped a period of unprecedented growth and national recognition. Under Bob's leadership, Cheyenne Mountain Zoo evolved from a respected regional attraction into one of the most celebrated zoos in North America. Annual attendance more than doubled during his tenure, and the Zoo became consistently ranked among the top five zoos on the continent. He led transformative campus expansion projects, including African Rift Valley, Rocky Mountain Wild, Encounter Africa, Australia Walkabout, Water's Edge: Africa, and the International Center for the Care and Conservation of Giraffe—each reflecting a commitment to immersive guest experiences grounded in animal well-being and conservation impact. A passionate advocate for wildlife protection, Bob launched the Zoo's Quarters for Conservation program in 2008, which went on to raise more than $6 million for frontline conservation partners around the world. His personal involvement with field conservation efforts, including work connected to Tsavo Trust in Kenya, underscored his belief in the power of accredited zoos to protect species and wild places. Beyond

Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, Bob contributed his expertise through leadership roles with the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums and service on Association of Zoos and Aquariums committees and boards. Bob Chastain's legacy is defined by visionary growth, financial stability, innovative conservation funding, and a mission-driven culture dedicated to connecting people with wildlife and inspiring stewardship of the natural world.

Shirley Martinez received the **Julie Penrose Award** which honors an outstanding woman who has made contributions to her community through dedicated leadership, engagement, and service. Shirley Martinez is a community leader whose career spans military service, public utilities, cultural programming, disability inclusion, and civic engagement. A proud veteran with more than 20 years of military service, Shirley served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army in roles ranging from Telecommunications Petty Officer and Journeyman Welder to Court Reporter and Chief Legal Non-Commissioned Officer. Her distinguished military career laid a strong foundation for a lifelong commitment to service, leadership, and equity. Following her military retirement, Shirley continued her dedication to public service in Colorado Springs. She spent two decades with Colorado Springs Utilities as Senior EEO/Compliance Specialist and Diversity Advisor. She later served five years as Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Multicultural Outreach, and Accessibility for the Pikes Peak Library District, where she led initiatives that expanded access, representation, and community engagement. Shirley is widely recognized for her leadership in cultural programming and community collaboration. She led the celebrated "Everybody Welcome" Cultural & Diversity Festival. The event achieved national recognition, earning the 2010 National League of Cities Diversity Award after Shirley represented the City of Colorado Springs in Washington, D.C. She also played an instrumental role in the City's Sister City partnership with Fujiyoshida, Japan, serving as a cultural ambassador and project lead for international exchange initiatives and joint cultural festivals. Today, Shirley is the founder of SAJM Bridging Connections LLC, a consulting firm focused on people services, ADA and disability guidance, organizational culture, and strategic project management. A devoted mother of four and proud grandmother of fourteen, Shirley Martinez continues to build bridges across communities and champion belonging, equity, and opportunity throughout Colorado.

Short tribute videos for each of the awardees may be viewed here https://www.elpomar.org/programs/afe/
Photos from the celebration may be found here and downloaded with the PIN 7244:
https://kyleboylephotography.pixieset.com/elpomarfoundation2026nightofexcellence/

About Awards for Excellence and Night of Excellence Ceremony
In 1989, El Pomar Foundation's Board of Trustees developed Awards for Excellence (AFE) and, accordingly, the Night of Excellence ceremony to honor Spencer and Julie Penrose's commitment to the nonprofit sector. For more than 35 years, the program has recognized organizations and nonprofit leaders from across Colorado who serve their communities with distinction, including lifetime achievement awards honoring individuals' outstanding contributions to the nonprofit sector. Accompanying the awards are grants totaling $375,000 in recognition of their excellent work to support the people of Colorado. Since its inception, AFE has provided more than $7.8 million in grant support to more than 600 nonprofit organizations throughout Colorado. Honorees do not apply for the awards but are nominated and selected by community leaders throughout Colorado. More information can be found here: https://www.elpomar.org/programs/afe/

About El Pomar Foundation
El Pomar Foundation is one of the largest and oldest private foundations in Colorado. El Pomar contributes more than $30 million annually through grants in the areas of arts and culture, civic and community initiatives, education, health, and human services, as well as community engagement and leadership development programs to support Colorado nonprofit organizations, including three historic properties open to the public: Penrose

Heritage Museum, Penrose House Conference Center, and Will Rogers Shrine of the Sun. Spencer and Julie Penrose founded El Pomar in 1937 with the mission to enhance, encourage and promote the current and future well-being of the people of Colorado.

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