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Wilmers Integrity Prize Awarded to *Hang Time* Founder

Charles Grady leads illustrious group of finalists, earning \$50,000 prize to further the impact of aiding formerly incarcerated individuals

New this year: three finalists awarded \$5000 each

NEW YORK, NY, October 31, 2024 – [The Robert G. Wilmers Integrity Prize](#), which supports individuals working in the United States who demonstrate exceptional integrity through their actions and advocacy, has been awarded to Charles Grady, founder and CEO of [Hang Time](#), a Connecticut nonprofit committed to empowering and reintegrating ex-offenders back into society. Awarded each year, the Prize is a no-strings-attached cash award of \$50,000.

This recognition was announced yesterday in New York City by the Wilmers Integrity Prize, a nonprofit established in 2019 to support individuals working in the United States with exceptional integrity to better our world through their actions and advocacy. Integrity in leadership and service to the community are at the forefront of the Prize's search, and individuals working in the arts, education, environment, law, medicine, nutrition, social justice, and social reform are eligible. Named for Robert G. Wilmers, the late chairman and CEO of M&T Bank, the Prize honors leadership and service to community.

"We seek to highlight values that Bob himself pursued vigorously through his enduring commitment to enrich the communities where he lived and worked," said H. Rodgin Cohen, President of The Robert G. Wilmers Integrity Prize. "We honor those who have the catalytic inspiration to drive positive change in our society by recognizing and investing in leaders who are doing exceptional work." Mr. Cohen became President of the Wilmers Integrity Prize in June, succeeding Elisabeth Wilmers, widow of the late Robert G. Wilmers.

In addition, the Wilmers Integrity Prize announced today the formation of an endowed gift that makes possible the awarding of \$5,000 to each of the runners-ups. "This generous gift elevates the impact of the Wilmers Integrity Prize exponentially," said Executive Director Jennifer Trainer Thompson, "not only expanding our efforts to elevate those in our communities who are so deserving, but also increasing the impact and reach of the work we do. And it makes all the finalists winners." This new funding, which will provide cash awards to the runners-ups and

fund their travel to an annual awards ceremony, is generously funded by Sherwood Guernsey of Williamstown, Massachusetts. “All four leaders are outstanding,” said Guernsey. “Each one raises up their communities by offering, in their different programs, hope, security, opportunity, and integrity.”

In receiving the Wilmers Integrity Prize, Grady led an accomplished group of four finalists who have each launched game-changing programs to address inequity and drive positive change. In addition to Charles Grady, winner of the 2024 Wilmers Integrity Prize, finalists include Tia Bell, Renee Fluker, and Rina Madhani. All four have a clear story, a potential for increased impact, and have unique projects. They have created programs that are both deeply personal and that you could imagine at significant scale. They represent different points along a spectrum of growth, but all at places where the Prize could help.

THE FINALISTS

CHARLES GRADY

The winner of the 2024 Wilmers Integrity Prize, Charles Grady is the **founder and CEO of Hang Time in Bridgeport, New Haven, and Waterbury Connecticut**. In 2014, working full time for the US Attorney Office District of Connecticut, Charlie created Hang Time with a single purpose: to give individuals returning home from prison a positive place to talk and reintegrate back into society instead of going back to the same streets that helped lead them to prison. He was running an anti-violence program in Bridgeport that used scare tactics, which he didn't think was working. He found a neutral location and invited formerly incarcerated gang members to talk – “they’ve been voiceless for years.” That was November 14, 2014. Eight people showed up, he ordered pizza, and they talked. (Charlie picked a topic.) The next week, 14 showed up. Then 50. Then 73. There’s no advertising – just word of mouth. Hang Time now has multiple programs, ranging from a Hall of Change (honoring formerly incarcerated for community work), CHOICES (urban high school mentoring program through sports), scholarships, and Her Time (Hang Time for women). Over 1000 individuals have participated in Hang Time in four cities in just the first 8 months of 2024 alone. “Lives are rough in general,” noted Charlie. “But no one knows rough like coming home from years of incarceration. People don’t understand it and become desensitized. When you start to look at what they must overcome to get that scarlet letter off their back...you gotta look at them in a new light.”

Tia Bell, Founder and CEO of The True Reasons I Grabbed the Gun Evolved From Risks (T.R.I.G.G.E.R.) Project, Washington, DC. broke the cycle (thanks to a basketball scholarship) of the escalating problems stemming from concentrated poverty but returned home after college to help adjudicated youth. Tia founded a grassroots prevention program in response to gun violence in DC by providing safe space for youth survivors and telling the stories of gun violence users. Her unique approach - finding traumatized kids and helping them heal before they pull the trigger -- has caught the attention of U Michigan and the

CDC, which she is partnering with on a 5-year study. They want kids in large and small communities to understand the underlying shared root causes of gun violence, shifting the blame off community and centering the needs of people who have been forsaken by society. “Not many people take the approach of understanding the shooter,” her reference noted, “understanding the perspective of people for whom life is so terrible that picking up a gun is the logical choice. Tia facilitated it all. She is not only a youth development specialist, but a potential visionary on a broader societal level.”

After a 30+ year career as a social worker, **Reneé Fluker (founder and president, Midnight Golf Program, Detroit)** founded MGP in 2001 with 17 students when her son was the only person of color on the high school golf team. Today 5000 students have passed through the program, which equips at-risk Detroit youth with life skills training, coaching, mentoring, and the discipline of golf to succeed in college and beyond. Yearly her program serves 260 students, drawn from a pool of over 2,000 applicants. These students, primarily from public schools in the Detroit metro area, are selected for their demonstrated potential to succeed in college. The 30-week program provides them with a comprehensive suite of services, from golf lessons to life skills development and college readiness. The heart of the program lies not in the mechanics of the game, but in the community that Reneé has created. Golf is the entry point—the “hook”—that brings students together. What they receive is a network of support that extends well beyond their time in the program. Miss Reneé’s vision has been to build a safe space where students can learn, grow, and thrive, even in the face of adversity.

Born to Indian parents who immigrated to the US before she was born, **Rina Madhani (co-founder and executive director Start Lighthouse, the Bronx)** was a classroom teacher in the Bronx when, at the start of the pandemic, she launched Start Lighthouse to address childhood literacy through a social justice lens when she noticed that students had no books at home. (Over 55% of schools in NYC do not have functioning libraries, 63% are born into poverty, fewer than half of the students meet city/state learning standards.) She wrote to the principal of the largest elementary school in the district, which provides a lot of support services and said she wanted to give away books. They gave away 500 books in an hour. Several years later, leaving her teaching job for Start Lighthouse, she has given 21,000 multicultural books to youth to take home, helped establish 3 colorful libraries in elementary schools in the Bronx, and implemented reading comprehension specialists in those schools. She now has a waiting list of 51 schools.

In 2016, Bob Wilmers wrote in his annual letter to shareholders of M&T Bank: “Their integrity and character, their unwavering commitment to doing the right thing the right way, and their willingness – indeed eagerness – to go above and beyond the call of duty is the reason I am confident in our ability to thrive and prosper in service of our communities in the years to come.”

He could have been speaking about the three finalists and winner of the 2024 Robert G. Wilmers Integrity Prize.

The 14-member Wilmers Integrity Prize Selection Committee includes cellist Yo-Yo Ma, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Kevin Sullivan, previous Prize winners Max Kenner and Lundy Ramos Perez, among others. To learn more about the prize, please visit our website at www.wilmersintegrityprize.org.

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