



PRESS RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Contact: Michael Hoeben, Director of Communications

michael@tzedeksocialjusticefund.org | 757-389-1885

Tzedek Brilliance Awards Celebrate the Impact of Asheville Changemakers

ASHEVILLE, N.C., Oct. 22, 2025 — The Tzedek Social Justice Fund (Tzedek) is honored to announce that Paula Swepson Avery and Al Murray are the winners of the 2025 Tzedek Brilliance Awards.

The Tzedek Brilliance Awards are a one-time, no-strings-attached grant of \$50,000 honoring Asheville leaders who have engaged in impactful, intersectional efforts to further racial justice, promote LGBTQ equality, and dismantle antisemitism. Unlike the majority of Tzedek's grantmaking, which funds organizational work, the Brilliance Awards invest directly in the well-being of individual community leaders, recognizing and rewarding their past contributions to making Asheville a place where everyone can thrive.

Paula Swepson Avery received the Ella Baker Brilliance Award, which honors a Black community leader in Asheville who has empowered and organized others to address systemic oppression.

Al Murray received the Pauli Murray Brilliance Award, which honors a community leader whose work, like Murray's, bridges movements and embodies the truth that all struggles for liberation are interconnected.

Inspired by transformative grantmaking models that shift power dynamics between funders and grantees, the Tzedek Brilliance Awards invest in innovative individuals driving meaningful social transformation in our region.

"When I think of brilliance, I think of persistence, purpose, and people like Paula and Al," said Libby Kyles, Tzedek Executive Director. "Their brilliance isn't about spotlight; it's about spark. They ignite possibility in others. At Tzedek, redistributing power starts by recognizing the brilliance already thriving in our communities. Paula and Al embody that truth. Their work shows how deep local leadership and intersectional vision can reshape systems, nurture healing, and inspire collective action."

About the Awardees

Paula Swepson-Avery

Paula Swepson Avery is the Executive Director and Founder of West Marion, Inc., the first and only Black-led nonprofit in McDowell County. A visionary and equity-driven leader, Paula has transformed the organization into a powerful catalyst for community empowerment and systems change. With deep expertise in community mobilization, equitable development, and resource generation, she

has guided West Marion, Inc. from just \$10,000 in seed funding in 2016 to an annual operating budget of \$1.2 million in 2024. Under her leadership, the organization has earned widespread respect for its integrity, strong partnerships, and measurable impact. A passionate advocate for youth empowerment, Paula nurtures the leadership potential of young people and serves on several boards, including Mountain BizWorks, Impact Health, and the McDowell Technical Community College Foundation.

“I’m truly honored to receive the Brilliance Award,” shared Swepson Avery. “This recognition reminds me that real change happens when we lead with heart, courage, and community. The light we create together is what makes the work meaningful. I share this honor with everyone who continues to build equity, hope, and opportunity.”

Al Murray

Al Murray (they/them) is a white, nonbinary parent, storyteller, and collaborator whose commitment to collective liberation is deeply rooted in their rural Southern upbringing. They believe empathy and connection—even amid disagreement—are essential to building shared futures. Since moving to Asheville in 2012, Al has been a bridge-builder across sectors—supporting youth, advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion, and helping institutions reimagine how they share power and resources. Their experience spans roles as Youth Programs Manager at Youth OUTright, Director of Relationships & Special Projects at the Campaign for Southern Equality, and co-founder of a national project promoting equity and inclusion in youth-serving organizations across the U.S. and Canada. Now serving as Development & Communications Manager at WNC Health Network, Al’s work is guided by four essentials: tell the truth, make the right connections, be in right relationship to power, and take care.

“I’m honored and so humbled to receive the Pauli Murray Brilliance Award from Tzedek,” stated Murray. “It has been a gift to support and be supported by my community. I’m sharing this honor with the communities of people I’ve been so lucky to create with, to struggle and to celebrate with—who make joy, honesty, and bravery strategies for change.”

About the Grantmaking Process

A total of 17 nominations were submitted for the Ella Baker Award and 14 for the Pauli Murray Award. After in-depth consideration and conversation, Brilliance Award recipients were selected by a nine-person committee comprising Tzedek staff, board members, and past Brilliance Award recipients.

Learn more about Tzedek’s approach to social justice philanthropy here:

<https://tzedeksocialjusticefund.org/social-justice-philanthropy/>

ABOUT TZEDEK

The Tzedek Social Justice Fund (previously the Amy Mandel and Katina Rodis Fund) has supported social justice work since the 1990s. Tzedek’s adaptive, trust-based philanthropy funds Asheville nonprofits, grassroots and movement organizations, funder collaboratives, cooperatives, and community groups engaging in systems change, community healing, and the redistribution of money, resources, and power. Tzedek envisions a thriving Asheville where everyone’s needs are abundantly met, and everyone is safe, respected, and celebrated—believing that a community rooted in joy and love is possible.

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