

St. Vincent de Paul Georgia – 2026 Top Hat Nominees

DISTRICT ONE NOMINEE:

Nominee: **Betsy Van Etten**

Conference: Saint Joseph, Marietta

Years of service: 20+

Offices held: President, VP, Caseworker, Thrift Store Volunteer, Pantry Volunteer, Outreach Minister, Parish Council

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Betsy has dedicated almost all her life to the Society and the Church. She is always present at the Parish, and volunteers in several ministries. She has worked for the Society in 2 different Conferences as she moved with her husband, and when she returned to St Joseph’s, she has always been available and reliable. Our Pastor has asked her to participate in and lead several ministries. She has been an essential guide for our President as he learned of the many challenges in serving a Conference. She has also formed a new ministry, the Society of Martha and Mary. This group is dedicated to visiting those who are homebound and in need of companionship and meals. As I write this, I searched the Parish website for a list of the ministries to which she contributes. It is impossible to list all of the groups to which she belongs as the list alone would exceed the word limit for the nomination.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

Betsy is kind and caring. She volunteers for every meeting and always participates in conversation and prayer. She is encouraging and helpful to those who join our Society and provides guidance and assistance to those volunteering for a new aspect of the Society. It is very challenging for someone new to casework or home visits, and having a friend who can offer support, friendship, and forgiveness in the rare instance when a mistake is made is one of most important components in the improvement and growth of a Vincentian. Betsy’s willingness to give her time and experience has proven to be one of the most important aspects of the improvement and direction of our Conference. One of the most notable indicators of her love and friendship is her participation in our pot-luck suppers. As we increased our meeting frequency, we decided, with Betsy’s recommendation, to add routine social meetings that involve informal meals where we meet and talk. She manages and organizes these and has been instrumental in their success. These meals have been one of the most important components of our recruiting success as it has given us a means to welcome new members without the stress of performance or immediate commitment to a particular aspect of the Society. They are a place where we can talk and socialize, and they have been the most useful method of letting new members meet us and become our friends. With this loving atmosphere we find that new volunteers are able to gradually seek the aspect of the Society where they will be happiest and most productive. All of this has come from Betsy.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Our Conference is both wealthy and poor. We have an extremely generous Parish, but we also have large geographic areas within our boundaries where our Neighbors live in poverty and experience financial distress, and experience need that can be overwhelming. Using Betsy’s experience as a President in an adjacent Conference, and her willingness to discuss and debate our shortfalls and strengths, she has been an essential part of our growth and improvement. We had allowed our Conference to change during the Covid pandemic, and it was a challenge to return to the Vincentian way of life. She provided knowledge and guidance without negative judgement which kept our focus on the Neighbor instead of our own desires. We were able to slowly return to the Vincentian methods of assistance in a manner that allowed us to continue to help those in serious need of aid without turning our back on them when assistance proved to be challenging. Her input was instrumental in our development of creating methods of assisting our Neighbors through alternate means such as counselling and encouragement, while contributing financially to different aspects of their lives beyond that which they had requested. Frequently this would allow them to address their perceived need in a different manner than they desired that then permitted them to recover. We find that need has increased in our Conference as we are repeatedly told we are one of the few organizations that can help. With Betsy’s essential contributions, we manage to persist, and our Caseworkers and Home Visitors have not only succeeded but strengthened their resolve to help Neighbors in Need.

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DISTRICT TWO NOMINEE

Nominee: **Bernie Gaydos**

Conference: Saint Brigid, Johns Creek

Years of service: 15+

Offices held: Conference President; Conference Vice President; Membership Coordinator; Caseworker; Assistant Treasurer; Conference Administrator; Mentor to All

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Bernie is a mentor to all in the conference, including mentoring all of us spiritually. He always shares his personal insights during the spiritual segment of our meetings always reminding us all that we are a society intended to grow our spirituality. His message is always uplifting and intended to encourage all of us. Bernie is devout, participating in weekly Bible Study and our parish Man to Man ministry intended to grow our faith and understanding. He always brings his spirituality to home visits, and without hesitation invites our neighbors to lead a closing prayer as the visit concludes. Finally, Bernie epitomizes spiritual growth by constantly reaching out to prospective new members, realizing the worth of the society in our spiritual growth and wanting to share it with others.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

Bernie is always available and willing to talk about a specific case or about ideas in general. He is a friend to all of us in the conference and none of us would hesitate to call him for advice. He has mentored countless Vincentians in their role as caseworker. He is always cultivating relationships in and out of the parish and due to his influence and friendships, we have created some great partnerships with neighboring charities. Bernie is active in a number of ministries where he has cultivated countless friendships and as a result has invited many into the Society, many who are now conference members. Bernie has the ability to put everyone at ease when conversing one on one or in a group. He is a friend to many including neighbors that he has served.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

When it became clear that our homeless and temporary housing neighbors required special attention, it was Bernie who realized the special and urgent needs of these neighbors and took it on himself. Additionally, Bernie is not one to abandon a situation when there are opportunities to make a life situation better. This has become obvious in a number of cases that he’s shared during our conference meetings where he’s gone the ‘extra mile’ for a veteran in need or an elderly woman in need of housing. Because of his career experience and his experience as a Vincentian, Bernie has a rich history of knowledge in problem solving which comes in handy in casework. Recently he has volunteered for a role as a district mentor for casework so others will benefit from his experience and knowledge. Bernie has the true heart of a Vincentian.

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DISTRICT THREE NOMINEE

Nominee: **Patricia Wagner**

Conference: Saint Lawrence, Lawrenceville

Years of service: 10 years

Offices held: Excellent Caseworker, Resource Development Coordinator, New Member Coordinator

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Pat is a faithful Catholic woman who deeply integrates prayer into her daily life and SVdP ministry. She participates in a weekly Bible study and a women’s small group, where she consistently offers prayers for Neighbour’s in Need. Her spirituality translates into action as the “hands and feet” of Jesus. She provides compassionate care to everyone she serves, always offering to pray with the Neighbors during home visits and in follow-up calls. In her role as New Membership Coordinator, Pat has identified and reached out to parishioners interested in working with SVdP by phone calls, invitations, and visits. She has followed through with potential members to facilitate Ozanam training and providing mentoring opportunities for all new members.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

Pat fosters friendships with our Vincentians both old and new as well as our Neighbors. She keeps a log in her phone of all the Neighbors she serves as a caseworker with a little information about each Neighbor in the notes (# of children, children’s names, financial situation, and other needs). As she encounters a resource that fits their needs, she will give them a quick call to let them know about the resource and how to access it. As an example; if there are notices about free food at the local park locations or diapers from Helping Mommas she lets the Neighbors know. She also, checks in on Neighbors with a quick call just to see how they are doing. Another example of her Friendship is during the holidays; Pat and her husband Bill (caseworker too) brought a turkey to her Neighbors family. The Neighbor was very appreciative and said to her kids, “we do not have family here but we have Miss Pat.” She additionally develops friendships with all at our Conference by keeping in touch with phone calls. She brings “door prizes”, little spiritual cards from SVdP, Mathew Kelly books, and other small gifts to each Conference meeting to keep everyone engaged. As the New Member Coordinator, she develops relationships with all the new prospective members.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Pat exemplifies service through her roles as a Caseworker, Resource Coordinator, and New Member Coordinator. To promote Justice, she actively engages with the Voice of the Poor committee seminars SVdP USA, On Line Book Club with Poverty Action, the Gwinnett Coalition zoom meetings to keep up with Gwinnett programs that are useful for our Neighbors, and poverty action groups to identify an address root cause of the needs. She independently trained as a Furniture Bank case manager to procure free furniture for our Neighbors. And she partners with other local charitable organizations in Gwinnett like Dream Chasers 21, Blessing Bags of Warmth, and is a partner with the Carepointe Church for food distribution. All these activities help foster collaboration with other community charitable organizations to increase the ability to serve more Neighbors in Need. Pat developed, edited and updated our St. Lawrence resource packet that appears on our church website for all to access for resources in our community. Our Conference sends out this resource to each Neighbor who calls for help. The packet is 26 pages long and has been a great resource for our caseworkers and Neighbors. In addition, Pat sends out regular notices to the members of our Conference to inform them when she picks up orders of diapers and feminine products at the Helping Mommas each month. She only asks the members to send her the sizes and needs of their Neighbors. Pat is an invaluable member of our Conference! Her compassion, her energy, her creativity, her medical experience as a nurse of 40 years, and her love for Jesus is what makes Pat Wagner a Top Hat Award Winner for St. Vincent de Paul!

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DISTRICT FOUR NOMINEE

Nominee: **Manny Sequeira**

Conference: Holy Spirit, Atlanta

Years of service: 5

Offices held: Conference President, Vice President

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

As President, Manny has incorporated the following essential examples of Spirituality: 1) A different Vincentian Rule is addressed in our monthly meeting and in his weekly communications to ensure we stay focused on essential spirituality elements. 2) He has implemented the Vincentian practice of bringing groceries to each home visit; we first ask our Neighbor in Need what food items and/or household items they need. This ensures we bring what is truly needed. We find it is greatly appreciated. 3) He helps ensure we look hard for resources to help those neighbors who face difficult situations.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

Manny is an excellent listener who then displays compassionate solutions, ideas, recommendations for our neighbors in need during home visits. He has an innate ability to counsel with care and concern to demonstrate Vincentian friendship. At the same time, Manny also provides the same counsel to our membership, so we all are keenly aware of the importance of conveying Vincentian friendship on our home visits. As mentioned in 1) above, the Vincentian Rules covered in our meeting focus on elements of friendship like showing respect and dignity to Neighbors in Need.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Manny has helped initiate a brief our practice of communicating in our Sunday church bulletin highlighting a Neighbor we were able to help because of parishioner support which includes a thank you and an invitation to consider learning more about our ministry. He also has helped capture vital service statistics by numerical count (family number and number who are children), race and ethnicity, dollars given, needs addressed, etc. This monthly report has been shared with membership, our Pastor, and a long-time parishioner donor to both our Church and directly to our Conference. The results of both initiatives have exposed the root cause of why and where our financial support is needed. This has led to this generous parishioner providing funds to help launch key support for our Latino community and also financial support for our Marillac Moms initiative.

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DISTRICT FIVE NOMINEE

Nominee: **George Spirito**

Conference: St. Phillip Benizi, Jonesboro

Years of service: 33+ according to CMS - possibly more as no one can remember the exact year. George's wife Sylvia was a Vincentian and he would drive her to church and home visits while he was still working full-time. They joined the parish in 1972.

Offices held: President, Vice President, Treasurer, Case Worker and Volunteer

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

George Spirito has been with SVdP for over 50 years, although only officially on record for 33 years. George has ingrained in him “That could be Jesus you are helping.” His motto is “What would Jesus do?”. He does God's work. If a volunteer complains about a Neighbor possibly taking advantage of us, George's response is “You have to feed them all.” “It's brave of them to even come to us in the first place.” George always puts everyone else first, but he is far too humble to take credit for anything. George is so honest that when a store gave him a dime too much in change he returned the dime. If we're running late on our prayer before weekly pantry, George is the first one to call “prayer time” to make sure we give God His due and ask for His blessing before we go out to serve.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

George reminds me of Jesus in that he **loves all the people** regardless of race, color, religion or social status. He just truly loves people. He loves to engage with them and get to know them, and he accepts everyone just as they are. He mentored our neighbors and treated everyone with trust, equality and respect. I've never heard him say an unkind word about anyone. There are many neighbors who have grown and moved away but will still come back to the pantry just to see George and to bring their babies to him (George loves the babies!). George always has open arms for anyone in need of a hug. He makes our volunteers feel welcome and appreciated. He asks about our families. He keeps us in his prayers. He brings each Vincentian a candy or popcorn gift on pantry day at Christmas, Valentine's and Easter.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

George is 92 years old; physically limited in what he can do. Yet every Friday, he is the first to arrive at pantry. He greets everyone with a smile. He assists by breaking down cardboard boxes that are taken to recycle. He rarely misses pantry day. In his earlier days, George did it all; drove the truck to ACFB weekly, drove the forklift, did home visits, stocked shelves, filled food boxes, paid bills. He went to the “NO TELL MOTELS” to serve a single Mom with 9 children. He helped an African Immigrant single mother find a job; she now has three children in college. When his car battery was stolen during a home visit, he offered it up to God. He lives simply, driving the same car for 26 years. He lived the beatitudes with love for God and great love for our neighbors, the model of a servant leader.

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DISTRICT SIX NOMINEE

Nominee: **Jim Skehan**

Conference: Immaculate Heart of Mary, Atlanta

Years of service: 22

Offices held: Conference President, District Spiritual Advisor

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality

During his tenure as President of the IHM Conference, Jim placed a strong emphasis on Vincentian spirituality by prioritizing opening and closing prayers and prepared spiritual reflections/discussions at every meeting. He has also been an active member of our conference’s Spirituality Committee since its inception approximately 3 years ago. During our monthly meetings, he takes his turn leading the reflection and shares his own personal experiences to enrich the group's dialogue. In addition, he previously served as the District 6 Spiritual Advisor. In that capacity, his reflections had a way of drawing out others such that they would contribute to the discussions. Jim also attends daily Mass twice a week, where he frequently encounters fellow Vincentians and neighbors he has supported as a caseworker. These interactions within a sacred space naturally incorporate spiritual elements and often touch upon his role as a Vincentian, which is well-known within the parish.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

While serving as conference president and now as past president, Jim has consistently been welcoming to both new and prospective members of SVdP. In his concern for the well-being of our conference, its members, and the people we serve, Jim agreed to stay on as president beyond the normal 6-year limit until a replacement was willing to step in. As a caseworker who has completed over 500 cases since becoming a Vincentian, he frequently goes above and beyond typical service to offer true Vincentian friendship to our neighbors. He demonstrates this in actions such as using his pickup truck to help neighbors move to new apartments and providing transportation to the MARTA rail station. Jim has also used his truck on several occasions to deliver furniture donations to the SVdP thrift store or to other caseworkers’ neighbors. He also regularly socializes with other conference members outside of formal meetings and activities.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Jim is the workhorse of IHM Conference. He never hesitates to step forward when there is a difficult case or challenging situation to handle. Examples include:

- A neighbor with a family of nine had to move to a new apartment, but he worked two jobs and could not afford to miss work. So, Jim helped him to move, thereby avoiding loss of essential wages.
- For 8 years, Jim organized and led IHM Conference’s monthly first Saturday operation of the Chamblee food pantry. He no longer organizes that effort but continues to volunteer there regularly.
- Jim consistently volunteers to help and provide leadership in our conference’s activities with the parish, including the semi-annual food drives, annual clothing drive, and the annual Christmas Giving Tree program.
- Jim volunteers weekly at the Chamblee food pantry and, in addition to doing casework for the IHM Conference, serves as a caseworker at the Council office.

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DISTRICT SEVEN NOMINEE

Nominee: **Cathy Lepkowski**

Conference: Christ Our King and Savior, Greensboro

Years of service: 13

Offices held: Conference President, Vice President, Secretary

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Cathy, as “Servant Leader” continually leads us to renew our sense of purpose as she guides us to see how OUR WORK AS VINCENTIANS and brings Christ’s presence into our world daily. Under her Presidential leadership, “Serving of Hope” was introduced at our regular monthly meetings, and that inspired us of us to continue that practice in our conference. It creates a time of reflection and *prayer*, silencing our minds. She is always available to respond to emergencies, showing compassion, empathy, and patience, even when it may be inconvenient for her. Her listening skills, intense and reflective and non-judgmental, are superlative. Cathy consistently exemplifies an understanding and acceptance of the poor, and in giving them unconditional love through visits and *prayer*. She embodies spirituality every moment of the day, attending Mass and living her faith by example.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

One of Cathy’s many strengths has incredibly helped our conference with recruitment. One feels immediate “friendship” when her words to you are spoken. That caring traverses her interactions. While secretary (and scheduler), Vice President (and Vincentian trainer), and President and now actively engaged Past President, Cathy fosters a feeling of caring and friendship. Her communications always create that feeling of bonding that embodies friendship. Cathy’s attitude always reminds us of our Vincentian bond as we journey together towards holiness. Many of the caseworkers in our conference remarked that though we all are different in personalities and strengths, Cathy’s acceptance and non-judgemental temperament unites us in friendship to serve. Cathy sends out emails to support family with challenges, emails which are loving and inspirational. She has recruited well, and created a Vincentian group bound by friendship and spiritual love.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Cathy has been *tireless* in serving the poor cheerfully, respectfully and without judgement. She has taken on many special works, in addition to caseworker roles of direct contact and home visits. Some of these additional roles have been in staying actively engaged in initiatives for Affordable Housing, Christmas Giving Tree for children, Food Drives and Distribution, Special Funding Opportunities and Grants, and furniture collection and distribution. Cathy dedicates her time to train and guide new Vincentians, who call and request guidance and approval. She continues to answer the calls of our Conference Vincentians (at any hour of the day) directing them as they navigate the many resources available in our community. One caseworker shares a story that reveals Cathy: When the caseworker was out of town, and an opportunity for permanent housing for a young mother and her three children became available, Cathy enthusiastically took over the case, found furniture, had it delivered and personally drove over 50 miles to facilitate delivery of a gift card to the client and her family.

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DISTRICT EIGHT NOMINEE

Nominee: **Joanne Mauro**

Conference: St. Catherine Laboure, Jefferson

Years of service: 15

Offices held: Conference President (twice); District President, SVdP Council Board, Thrift Store Manager

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Joanne demonstrates spirituality in her interactions with people. She is always available to help Intake Person(s), Case Workers, Board Members, fellow Vincentians, and our Neighbors. She is typically one of the first conference members to share her thoughts during our spiritual reflection period of the agenda. She has, for years, spearheaded our conference’s annual Stations of the Cross, Thanksgiving Meals for Neighbors, the Christmas Angel Tree, and anything else that needs to be done. She treats everyone with respect and dignity. Joanne, following in her Mother’s example, has led the “Rosary in the Park” event, held annually on Worldwide Rosary Day in May. The last 2 years it has been held in Thrift store parking lot at Noon

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

Joanne exemplifies friendship in several ways. First and foremost, she is dependable. When Joanne says she will do something for a Case Worker, Intake Person, fellow Vincentian or neighbour-in-need it gets done without regard to her personal situation. Joanne has developed friendships throughout our church, thrift store, conference and community, including our neighbour(s)-in-need. Additionally, she is a good listener, non-judgmental, and empathetic. Joanne does an excellent job of following up with Neighbors she helps. In one case, she helped a struggling couple get into public housing, used Thrift Store vouchers to help them set up housekeeping, and helped get them jobs. She followed up with them for several years.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Joanne exemplifies Service by serving as a Case Worker, our previous Conference President, and our previous District President, and as a previous Manager of our Conference Thrift Store. She also continues to volunteer at the Thrift Store frequently. Examples include:

- Joanne was a founding member of our Conference and the Thrift Store. She did much of the due diligence required to get the store up and running. The subsequent impact of the thrift store on our community is immeasurable. Our conference’s ability to provide direct aid is probably five times more than it would be if we didn’t have a thrift store.
- When we lost our thrift store manager, Joanne volunteered to take on that role to ensure our ability to continue store operations. In this role Joanne was able to increase both volume and profit by 30%. This positively affected our community as well as our Neighbors in need as we were able to greatly increase our assistance for Neighbors in Banks and Jackson Counties.

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DISTRICT NINE NOMINEE

Nominee: **Cindy Kirksey**

Conference: St. Francis, Blairsville

Years of service: 7

Offices held: Conference Treasurer, Case Manager, Intake Person, handles CMS entry and teaches others how to do CMS entry.

1. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Spirituality.

Cindy, as treasurer, performs key support to our conference. She ensures that our bills are paid, that our records are accurate, and never hesitates to assist others in working out any financial discrepancies. Cindy is a calming voice and always generous with her time and talents. Cindy has become the “go to” person when a member needs assistance navigating the CMS entry system. Again, she is always helpful, patient and takes the time needed to coach someone who has the desire to learn the CMS process. Cindy’s spirituality is demonstrated through the way she lives her life, supporting her own family, conference members, friends and neighbors who come to us for assistance. Always available to listen, help problem solve, and take action to resolve a problem.

2. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Friendship.

In the position of treasurer, Cindy has to interface with neighbors, fellow members, parishioners, local and national companies. This comes in the form of telephone conversations, written communications, and face-to-face meetings. Always professional, never critical, or opinionated, Cindy represents our organization and herself as a person of integrity.

3. Please state how the nominee exemplifies the Vincentian “Essential Element” of Service and Justice.

Cindy Kirksey is a longtime member of our conference and during her tenure has shown friendship to members, engaged in person-to-person contact, always in a professional manner, and always in a manner that God would be proud of. Cindy is an integral part of the leadership team that keeps our conference working together in an effective, caring force for good in our community, representing our Catholic, Christian values.