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## **Illinois Principals Association Awards 2025 Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award to Dr. Keli Ross and Living Grace Church**

Springfield, IL – Dr. Keli Ross, principal of Memorial Junior High School in Lansing, IL and Living Grace Church of Lynwood, IL have received the 2025 Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award for their partnership on the “Mighty Mustangs Care Initiative.” The award is presented by the Illinois Principals Association and sponsored by Horace Mann Companies.

The Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award was created to recognize an IPA principal or assistant principal, and an agency, association, or community member displaying an outstanding effort in creating partnerships between schools, principals, associations, and organizations for the betterment of all.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Dr. Ross began the “Mighty Mustangs Care Initiative” to assist families facing financial struggles and provide basic needs. At that time, Pastor Philip S. France, Sr. and Living Grace Church announced their effort to provide food for families during the holiday season. With the support of the church and Pastor France, the Mighty Mustangs Care Initiative assisted close to 100 families in need in the Lansing community. This partnership has also extended to leadership training and opportunities for Memorial Jr. High School students through the Building Empowering Serving Together (B.E.S.T.) Summer Leadership Academy. Nearly 30 student leaders have been developed in this program, resulting in them becoming Mighty Mustangs Achieve Leaders, working as schoolwide mentors and student advisors.

“Our Mighty Mustang Achieve Leaders support the ‘Blessed to Be a Blessing’ campaign through Living Grace Church,” said Ross. “Our administrative team and student leaders help pack food boxes and distribute them to those in need. This has been a self-esteem development and character-building opportunity for our student leaders as they develop values that promote community service and kindness to all. We have also expanded the B.E.S.T. Summer Leadership Academy by including 6th grade students, in addition to 7th grade students, for time to mentor and develop our student leaders across a two-year span.”

Jennifer Hartmann, Associate Principal for Operations & Activities at Memorial Jr. High School shared, “Dr. Ross has formed a lasting partnership with Pastor France to create an initiative that has resulted in serving more than 20 families each year for the past 5 years to receive donated items for Thanksgiving meals. Additionally, coats, hats, and gloves have been provided to more than 40 families per year. Dr. Ross' work resulted in the summer B.E.S.T. Leadership Training Program leading to participating students becoming trained leaders of the MJHS community. These students lead fundraisers, events, and serve as student ambassadors to the community at large. The partnership between Dr. Ross and Pastor France has fed, clothed, and trained more than 100 people and had lasting communitywide impact.”

The Illinois Principals Association serves over 6,600 educational leaders statewide, whose mission is to develop, support, and advocate for innovative educational leaders. The Reaching Out & Building Bridges Award is supported by Horace Mann Companies of Springfield, IL. For more information about the IPA, please visit [www.ilprincipals.org](http://www.ilprincipals.org).

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