



2026 Learning for Life Recipients

Jessica Crocker

Jessica Crocker '18 earned an education degree with four certifications from Samford in 2018. She began her career teaching fifth grade at Cahaba Elementary in Trussville before moving to third grade and then first grade at Moody Elementary. While in these roles, she participated in several leadership positions, including math team coach and Safety Patrol Leadership Team member, and played a central role in establishing and leading the school's Ambassador Program.

While teaching lower grade levels, she became certified in the Science of Reading and greatly enjoyed working with younger children while helping students learning to read develop a love of literacy. In 2025, she became a preschool teacher at Mountain Brook Baptist Church, where she loves building foundational academic, social and developmental skills and introducing many students to school for the first time.

Jessica received an award from the generous Kern Family Foundation that allowed her to begin a master's degree in character education from the University of Birmingham in the U.K. She recently completed this degree with Merit. In 2024, she and her husband became foster parents. Through this unique and rewarding experience, which occurred alongside her master's studies, Jessica discovered a somewhat untapped area to explore. She channeled this newfound passion into a qualitative, nationwide research study for her dissertation, which earned a passing grade "with Distinction." She presented the dissertation, titled "Exploring Foster Parents' Perceived Impacts on Character Development," at a residential event in 2026. In the future, she hopes to continue exploring the intersection of character education and foster care. Jessica lives with her husband, Hunter, and their Yorkiepoo, Cinnamon, in Moody. She is currently expecting their first child.

Tiffany Hamilton

Tiffany Hamilton '07, EdD '23, is an educational leader with 16 years of experience dedicated to advancing student achievement and cultivating positive school cultures. Guided by the belief that meaningful partnerships among educators, families and

communities are essential to student success, she is passionate about inspiring excellence while preparing students to become productive, responsible citizens. Tiffany currently serves as principal of Magnolia Elementary School in Trussville City Schools, where she is leading a schoolwide focus on academic excellence and intentional character development. In addition to her school leadership, she teaches the master's Internship in Instructional Leadership course to aspiring leaders through a partnership between Trussville City Schools and Samford University.

Before becoming a principal, Tiffany served as supervisor for secondary teaching and learning for Trussville City Schools, where she partnered with secondary administrators and teachers to strengthen instructional practices. She also served as assistant principal at Hewitt-Trussville High School and Thompson High School, where she led initiatives in instructional leadership, school safety, Advanced Placement and student transition programs.

Before transitioning into administration, Tiffany taught high school chemistry and biology. Her classroom experience spans grades 6–12 and reflects a deep commitment to rigorous instruction, equitable learning opportunities, college and career readiness, and meaningful relationships with students and families.

Tiffany earned a Doctor of Education in educational leadership from Samford University in 2023, where her dissertation examined the impact of school transition, parental involvement and social networks on academic outcomes for at-risk students. She also holds an EdS and a master's degree in secondary education from Liberty University. She completed her Bachelor of Science in biology in 2007 at Samford as a track and field student-athlete.

Tiffany and her husband, Will, have three sons, and when they are not busy attending sports practices and competitions, they enjoy traveling, reading and spending time as a family.

Shane Harmon

Shane Harmon '93 is a 1988 graduate of Thompson High School in Alabaster, Alabama, where he was a three-year letterman in football and track. He earned All-County, All-Metro, and All-State honors, was named the Shelby County Defensive Player of the Year, and was selected as a permanent team captain by his peers. At age 16, Shane dedicated his life to Jesus after witnessing how faith transformed the lives of others. Following a deep study of Scripture, he surrendered his life and placed his full trust in Christ.

Although originally committed to play football for Troy State University, much prayer led him to accept a walk-on opportunity at Samford in the fall of 1988. Shane went on to start all 47 games of his four-year career with the Samford Bulldogs, earning a full athletic

scholarship. His senior-year team remains the most successful in school history and is enshrined in the Samford Athletic Hall of Fame.

During his freshman year at Samford, Shane felt called by God to become an educator, a calling that was confirmed by his professors and curriculum in the School of Education. In 1991, during a mission trip to Japan, God gave him a clear vision for his lifelong ministry: using his role as a teacher to educate and inspire students while sharing the Gospel and discipling young believers.

Over a 32-year career in both public and private schools, Shane has taught sixth-grade social studies, science, English, reading, math, geography, and Bible studies. As a coach, he has served as a junior high head coach and a varsity defensive line coach. He consistently prepares his students for academic success and has developed outstanding defensive linemen for the Briarwood Christian Lions, contributing to two state championships and producing numerous award-winning, college-scholarship players. Ultimately, Shane counts his greatest accomplishments as the lasting relationships he maintains with former students and players, continuing to serve actively in their lives as a mentor and spiritual guide.

Shane wishes to extend his deepest gratitude to the educational and coaching mentors who shaped his path: Mrs. Marion Sides, who first encouraged him to teach; the late Mrs. Billie Hines, who demonstrated the profound impact of a teacher through love and patience; and Barry Jones, Eddie Williams, Larry Simmons, and Bob Stinchcomb, who helped mold him as a player and Christian coach. He also thanks Byrle Kinard and Fred Yancey for believing in him and setting the standard as a Christian educator and coach. Finally, he gives special thanks to his wife, Dana Harmon, his dedicated partner in life and ministry for 32 years.

Erica Hochberger

Erica Hochberger '02 is a 2002 Samford human development and family science alumna who went on to complete a master's degree in social work at Alabama A&M University. In the early years of her career, while raising young children, she worked part time serving children affected by domestic violence and providing short-term counseling through her church. She joined the National Children's Advocacy Center in 2014 as a therapist, became the agency's first therapy supervisor in 2017 and has served as intervention and clinical director since 2021.

At NCAC, she has implemented several new evidence-based trauma therapy approaches that help the team better serve children of all ages affected by various kinds of abuse. Erica also recruited the department's first bilingual staff members, making it possible to conduct forensic interviews and therapy in Spanish without pausing for interpretation.

On behalf of NCAC, Erica often provides child abuse and trauma-related information through training, local media interviews and collaboration with various professionals. One training that holds a special place in her heart is last year's multilingual trauma training for

families who had fled violence in their homelands. Several years ago, she identified and escalated a gap in state law regarding the age of consent and foster parents. The law was changed, and Alabama teens have been safer as a result.

Erica loves putting together the puzzle pieces of community needs and available resources and is excited to see what the future holds. She recently opened a private practice, Hazel Green Counseling, to help fill the gap in mental health care in her own community. She is inspired by her clients in both settings, who thrive despite difficult circumstances. She is grateful for her family's love and encouragement and for Samford University's HDFS department and scholarships, which made all of this possible.

Chad Holden

Chad Holden, EdD '18, serves as executive director of the Alabama Association of School Boards, a role he assumed on July 1 following 24 years of service to Muscle Shoals City Schools as a teacher, school administrator and superintendent of education.

A lifelong resident of the Shoals area, Chad began his career in education in 2002 as a classroom teacher. He later served as an assistant principal before being named principal of Muscle Shoals High School at age 34. During his six years in that role, his leadership earned statewide recognition when he was named Alabama's High School Principal of the Year in 2019. The following year, he was selected to lead Muscle Shoals City Schools as superintendent.

Throughout his career, Chad has focused on building strong organizations by investing in people, expanding opportunities for students, and positioning schools for long-term success. As superintendent, he led efforts to expand early childhood education, strengthen instructional and student supports, invest in technology, safety and transportation, and plan for facilities needed to serve a rapidly growing community.

Chad earned his bachelor's, master's, and Education Specialist degrees from the University of North Alabama and his doctorate from Samford. He and his wife, Julia Beth, also an educator, have two sons, Conner and Evan. They are active in their church and community.

Now, as executive director of the Alabama Association of School Boards, Chad brings more than two decades of experience in public education and organizational leadership to his work on behalf of school boards and students across Alabama. His leadership is centered on promoting effective school board governance, preserving and strengthening local control of public education, and ensuring that the decisions made by state leaders ultimately expand opportunities for every student. He remains committed to equipping local school boards to lead effectively, govern responsibly, and create the conditions in which students, educators, schools, and communities can thrive.

Keri Johnson

Keri C. Johnson, EdD '14, is superintendent of Pelham City Schools, a position she has held for the past year. Before joining Pelham, she served five years as superintendent of the Tuscaloosa County School System. With more than 30 years in public education, Keri has served as a teacher and administrator in the Oxford City, Shelby County, Alabaster City, Tuscaloosa County and Pelham City school systems.

Keri holds a bachelor's degree in special education from Jacksonville State University, a master's degree in special education from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, an EdS in educational leadership from the University of Montevallo and a doctorate in educational leadership from Samford. She has served as an adjunct professor at the University of Montevallo and Samford and currently teaches graduate-level special education courses at the University of Alabama.

During her tenure as superintendent, Keri has led efforts focused on student achievement, college and career readiness, graduation rates, technology, and innovative educational opportunities. She has also led significant facility and athletic improvements and guided school systems through periods of substantial change.

A passionate advocate for public education, Keri has served on the State of Alabama Accountability Taskforce and completed the Alabama Transformational Leadership Academy and the School Superintendents Association's National Superintendent Certification Program. She also founded LeadHERship Alabama, a statewide network supporting women superintendents.

Keri is married to Chris Johnson and is the mother of three children, Emily, Abby, and Will.

Trina Leary

Trina Leary '20, MSW '22, received her bachelor's degree in human development and family science in 2020, followed by her Master of Social Work from Samford in 2022. After graduating, she moved to Washington, D.C., where she is now a licensed independent clinical social worker and practicing psychotherapist. In her clinical work, Trina specializes in supporting adults experiencing anxiety, trauma, grief, relationship and attachment concerns, reproductive and postpartum challenges and religious trauma.

In 2025, Trina began her Doctor of Social Work at Tulane University, where her academic interests have grown closely out of the themes she encounters in clinical practice. She is currently developing her thesis, which explores how women experience the erosion and reconstruction of intuition and self-trust following harmful religious experiences.

Trina hopes to continue integrating clinical practice and research throughout her career. She is especially interested in studying experiences that can be difficult to name or that have historically received limited attention in mental health research. Through her work, she hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of these experiences while helping

clinicians provide more thoughtful, informed, and responsive support to the people they serve.

Ca'Dric Moulton

Ca'Dric Moulton '17, MSE '19, is an educational leader entering her 10th year in education and her second year as an assistant principal. Born in Columbia, South Carolina, and raised in Nashville, Tennessee, she graduated from Williamson County Schools. She is deeply committed to improving student achievement, developing educators, and creating meaningful opportunities for students in Title I and underserved communities.

Ca'Dric graduated from Orlean Beeson School of Education in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in education. During her undergraduate years, she pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., served in leadership and became president of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. These experiences strengthened her commitment to servant leadership, collaboration and community impact. She earned a master's degree in elementary education in 2019 and returned to Samford in 2022 to obtain her leadership certification. She is currently pursuing an Educational Specialist (EdS) degree.

Ca'Dric began her educational career in 2017 as a first-grade teacher in Birmingham City Schools. Her passion for serving Title I and inner-city schools centered on providing students with positive learning experiences, opportunities for growth, and the support needed to succeed. While in Birmingham City Schools, she became actively involved in teacher leadership and school development and was honored as Teacher of the Year.

She later joined Jefferson County Schools, teaching third grade before serving in special education and intervention. Through these roles, she contributed to increased state assessment performance and helped foster a positive school culture and climate. Her dedication to students and staff earned her the Second Mile Teacher Award, recognizing her commitment to going above and beyond the call of duty.

As an assistant principal, Ca'Dric continues to expand opportunities through innovative projects, academic and athletic clubs and experiences that expose students to more than their everyday environment. Her leadership is centered on student engagement, achievement, teacher development, and creating lasting opportunities for every student to thrive.

Jodi Newton Excellence in Character Education Award Recipient

Jessica Crocker

Jessica Crocker '18 received a scholarship to pursue a Master of Arts in Character Education at the University of Birmingham in England, graduating with honors in December 2025. Her powerful research study, "Exploring Foster Parents' Perceived Impacts on Character Development," led to an invitation to present her findings at a character education conference in Charlotte, North Carolina. She was also selected to serve on a new graduate steering group for the university's master's program. Jessica has already distinguished herself as an outstanding researcher and plans to continue advancing the field through grant-funded research and other character education opportunities.

Orlean Beeson Award Recipient

Ruth Ash

Ruth Ash is a nationally known consultant in the areas of K-12 education, higher education and quality improvement. Ruth was Alabama deputy state superintendent of education and, before that, dean of Samford's School of Education. She served in public school systems in Alabama as a teacher, assistant principal, director of curriculum and staff development, assistant superintendent and superintendent.

Ruth is a former Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award Examiner and Judge. She has served as a member of the NCATE Board of Examiners and the Center for Quality Assurance in International Education Board of International Reviewers. She has served on accreditation visiting committees for NCATE, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the American Bar Association.

Ruth served as chair of the Alabama Committee on Teacher Enhancement and is past president of the Alabama Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. She has received numerous honors, including the Little Red School House Award for Significant Educational Innovation and the Truman Pierce Award for "educational leadership and outstanding contributions which significantly advance the direction of education in Alabama." She has been honored by Auburn University as a distinguished alumna and by the Birmingham Business Journal as one of its Top Ten Women in Business. She has participated in Leadership Birmingham and Leadership Alabama.

Ruth has presented invited keynote addresses at national and international conferences and served as a consultant to numerous school systems. She also serves on the International Journal of Learning and Intellectual Capital Editorial Board.

Ruth received her bachelor's degree from Auburn University, master's degree from the University of South Alabama, AA Certificate from the University of Alabama at Birmingham and doctorate from Auburn University.

Ruth is married to Charles Ash and has three children and five grandchildren.