

# SREENIDI (SREE) BALA

SuAnne Big Crow Memorial Award

The legacy of Suanne Big Crow is one that seeks to fill all people, and youth in particular, with pride, self-worth and dignity. The namesake of this award category spent her young life doing just that for Native American Lakota youth to ensure their cultural treasures, heritage and identities were celebrated before her life ended so tragically at the young age of seventeen.

As exhibited by her bright smile and eyes focused on the future, our 2024 honoree Sree Bala, carries on that legacy boldly by uplifting racial and social justice within her school community and lifting barriers for her fellow students to ensure educational equity for all.



A Junior at Farmington High School (FHS) in Connecticut, Sree not only breaks barriers for her peers, but breaks them herself as the only Junior chosen to sit on the Senior class led Social Justice Council (SJC) of the high school's Multicultural Student Union. The Social Justice Council (SJC) is made up of a diverse body of student leaders from multi-ethnic student clubs to celebrate the diversity and unique needs of the student population. As a member of the Council, Sree was pivotal in planning an impactful Social Justice Week (SJW) at the high school whereby discussions on racial and social justice were prioritized and students were given a platform to share presentations on various topics that relate to their clubs & most pressing matters affecting students.

An advocate for racial equity and as President of the Multicultural Student Union, Sree currently organizes students to speak at the Farmington Public Schools Board of Education to help implement Land Acknowledgements across the Farmington school district. Sree is very passionate about uplifting marginalized voices and acknowledging the important contributions of the Indigenous people that lived in Farmington for many generations.

Beyond empowering students and student voice at her school, Sree's unwavering commitment to the collective success of autism students is evident in her meticulous development of "Code For All Minds". Her passion for inclusivity led her to work with FHS Special Education faculty to design not only free curriculum for educators but also accompanying video lessons specifically tailored for neurodivergent students. These engaging video introductions create a dynamic and welcoming learning environment that caters to the diverse learning styles of these individuals. The impact of "Code For All Minds" extends far beyond curriculum and video lessons. Sree's exceptional leadership fosters a sense of belonging and community for students with autism within the tech landscape. Through personalized instruction, mentoring, and access to cutting-edge technology, Sree empowers these students to not only gain valuable skills and build confidence but also develop self-esteem and acquire tools for future success in seeking possible career pathways after high school. The curriculum is being implemented this year at FHS and would not have happened without Sree's vision.

Sree's work and advocacy extends even beyond her school walls. As an intern and ongoing advocate with the State of Connecticut Commission on Human Rights & Opportunities (CHRSO) Sree created the teen blog, which allows for middle and high school students to submit articles about civil and human rights law

and enforcement on a monthly basis and have those articles reviewed and published for consumption by the general public. At such a young age, Sree is the consummate public servant. Sree participates in the Connecticut Kids Court Academy (KCA), a social justice and attorney pipeline program for middle and high school students and she is a standout in the program. The Program is designed to raise the social consciousness of youth regarding civil and human rights law. Sree routinely participates in these discussions with her peers, attorneys, and judges from across the state of Connecticut and her ideas are groundbreaking and transformative.

Connecticut Education Association (CEA)/NEA member and Farmington Highschool School Counselor Chris Loomis, says the following about Sree: *“Whether it is an activity like Homecoming or a community service event, Sree is all in. She will be the one doing the behind the scenes work that no one will ever know about, and without her, many school functions wouldn’t happen. Sree also has the ability to step up and be in the spotlight for our events, making sure everything runs smoothly for everyone involved. Sree’s peers love her and always want to work with her. Everything she touches turns to gold...”*

Sree, we are continuing to root you on and look forward to the continued impact you will make on the world!