



Donovan Cummings Service Above Self Award

**By Angelique Ronald,
CHSSA Vice President of Activities**

Every year at CHSSA State, we celebrate excellence in a lot of visible ways. We hand out trophies, recognize champions, and honor the very best competitive performances in our beautifully diverse and talented state. But this award is different.

The Donovan Cummings Service Above Self Award is not about a single round, a single tournament, or even a single season. It exists to recognize the kind of work that makes all of those moments possible in the first place.

It is named in honor of Donovan Cummings, a CHSSA Hall of Fame member whose life in this activity was defined by service. For decades, Donovan coached in Stockton at Edison, Stagg, and Franklin, at times simultaneously, simply because students needed someone to show up for them. Even after retiring, he remained deeply involved, continuing to teach speech to migrant education students and giving his time to support the community he loved through the CHSSA board.

His commitment to CHSSA was extraordinary. Donovan became a voting member of the CHSSA Council in 1963 and remained active until 2008, one of the longest tenures in the organization's history. Over the years, he served in nearly every leadership role imaginable, including President, helping shape CHSSA into what it is today.

As Nermin Fraser shared when reflecting on his life, "Donovan's life was a life of service." That spirit extended far beyond titles or accomplishments. As NSDA Executive Director J. Scott Wunn once explained, "Donovan truly

understood the power of the spoken word and the importance of giving youth a voice."

Even Donovan himself described his career with a kind of joyful clarity: it was, in his words, a "brilliant decision," one filled with "beautiful students, caring parents, and brilliant coaching friends."

In recognition of that lifelong commitment, CHSSA established the Donovan Cummings Service Above Self Award in 2010. The award honors those who carry forward his legacy, individuals who give their time, energy, and care to this activity in ways that are not always visible but are always felt.

Over the years, this award has been given to individuals whose impact on CHSSA runs deep: Gay Brasher (2010), Ron Underwood (2011), Rita Prichard (2012), Nermin Fraser (2013), Hoon Ko (2014), Mikendra McCoy (2016), Matt Fraser (2017), Karson Kalashian (2018), Terry Abad (2019), Dr. Tommie Lindsey (2021), Derek Yuill (2023), and Angelique Ronald (2025).

As last year's recipient, it is especially meaningful to recognize what this award represents. Each recipient reflects a different chapter in CHSSA's story, but we all share something in common: a willingness to give time, energy, and care for the betterment of this community.

That is what service looks like. That's what Service Above Self is. And this year, we recognize someone who lives out Donovan's legacy every single day.



2026 Service Above Self Winner Ben Cummings

By Angelique Ronald,
CHSSA Vice President of Activities

The Kind of Person You Count On

If you have spent any time around CHSSA, you have felt Ben Cummings' impact whether you realize it or not.

For more than thirteen years, Ben has been a constant in this organization. Not someone seeking attention or recognition, but someone who is always there, doing the work, thinking things through, and making sure things run the way they should.

In his roles as Secretary and Webmaster, he carries an incredible amount of responsibility. But what stands out most is not just what he does, it is how he does it. Ben is thoughtful. He is fair. He listens closely, speaks carefully, and brings a steadiness to every conversation that helps anchor the room. Even in complicated moments, he brings things back to what matters.

And even in years when his work as an Activities Director, and his leadership within the California Association of Directors of Activities (CADA) demand so much of his time, he still shows up for CHSSA, not because he has to, but because he cares.

The Work That Makes Everything Else Possible

A lot of what Ben does is the kind of work people don't always see.

For years, when CHSSA ran on paper ballots, Ben personally scanned and uploaded every single ballot from the State

Tournament so students could receive feedback as quickly as possible. It was time-consuming, meticulous, and at times wildly frustrating work (especially when the scanner regularly chose violence) and he just did it because it mattered.

He also ran the tournament text help line on his own for years. That meant answering an absolute avalanche of questions, solving problems, and occasionally navigating some very creative student frustration when rounds, postings, or breaks ran late. There was, at one point, an attempt to threaten him with Avengers: Endgame spoilers if breaks weren't posted quickly enough, which remains one of the more dramatic escalation strategies in CHSSA history. Ben handled it exactly the way he handles everything: calmly, kindly, and without missing a beat.

That same energy shows up in so many other places. Ben is the one setting up over 600 awards so that every student moment feels recognized. He is the one building the State dance from the ground up, thinking through the space, the flow, the feeling of it all, and then doing the actual work to make it happen. When students walk in, it just feels right, a celebration, the end of something big and the chance to just be together.

When you step back and look at all of that together, you start to understand why Ben's impact runs so deep. The work matters, but it is the way he shows up that people carry with them. And it is something others have seen just as clearly.



“Ben represents the very best of what this award stands for. He serves without recognition, leads without fanfare, and makes everyone around him better simply by being there.” - Nermin Fraser

A Perspective From Nermin Fraser

CHSSA Hall of Fame Member (2025)

Service Above Self Award Recipient (2013)

CHSSA Vice President of Activities (2004 - 2017)

In 2010, following the loss of Hall of Fame member Donovan Cummings, CHSSA established the Donovan Cummings Service Above Self Award to recognize a coach whose work reflects Donovan’s lifelong commitment to service. This award honors those who go above and beyond, often behind the scenes, to support students, strengthen the activity, and show up for others in ways that matter.

Ben is one of those rare people who simply shows up. Every time, in every way that matters.

During my nearly 15 years as VP of Activities for CHSSA, I had the opportunity to work closely with Ben across just about every corner of the organization. He took over the website early on, helped lead the transition to online ballot review by scanning ballots late into the night long after others had gone home, coordinated postings across three tab rooms when we moved online, and when I had the then wild idea to introduce tournament-wide text messaging, Ben became our official texter.

Along the way, I came to understand that the most important part of my role was staffing. If you can find people who are solution-oriented, positive, and focused on doing what is best for kids, everything else tends to fall into place. Ben was

always at the top of that list.

What stands out most is how he does the work. Ben shows up every day with a smile, treats everyone with kindness, and gets the job done without ever seeking credit or recognition. If he makes a mistake, he owns it. If someone else makes a mistake, he quietly helps fix it and no one ever hears about it. He is the person who shows up early, stays late, and takes on the tasks no one else is lining up to do. And somehow, he made scanning endless ballots feel like a reasonable life choice.

Beyond all of that, he is simply someone who shows up for people. The first time I met Ben was when he jumped in Mikendra’s car and drove five hours to help decorate her friend’s wedding, which happened to be mine. He did not know me, was not getting paid, and did not hesitate. He just showed up because someone asked, and that is who he is.

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Making CHSSA Better for Everyone

Ben’s impact is not just in the hours he gives, but in the systems he improves.

Working closely with our Treasurer Jennifer Nguyen, he has helped modernize CHSSA’s rules, procedures, and digital infrastructure in ways that make the organization easier to navigate and understand. As Webmaster, he transformed the

CHSSA website into something clearer, more accessible, and more usable for our membership.

That kind of work matters more than it might seem at first glance. When information is easy to find, when expectations are clear, and when systems are intuitive, it creates more equitable access for schools across the state. It helps level the playing field and makes the activity more fair, more transparent, and more welcoming for everyone involved. That is the kind of impact Ben is always thinking about.

As CHSSA former President, State Tournament Director, and Hall of Fame member Reed Niemi shared, “I never asked Ben to do something that he didn’t find a way to make happen. He is truly a tremendous value to CHSSA.”

Showing Up, No Matter What

This past year, Ben showed what Service Above Self really means.

While navigating a cancer diagnosis and treatment, he continued to show up for CHSSA with the same consistency, care, and quiet commitment he has always carried. He didn’t step back or make it about what he was going through. He kept doing the work, supporting the people around him, and making sure things ran the way they should, because that is simply who he is.

And that kind of presence matters. It steadies people. It reminds you what this work is really about. In a space that can often feel fast-paced and demanding, Ben remained

grounded, thoughtful, and focused on others, even while facing something deeply personal.

Today, we get to celebrate something even more important. Ben has beaten cancer. He is in remission and healthier and stronger than ever.

And after years of him quietly taking care of everything for everyone else, it feels really good to get to celebrate him, to make a little bit of a fuss over someone who would never ask for it, and to remind him how much he means to all of us.

A Personal Reflection

As State Tournament Director for the last nine years, I can say this as clearly as I can say anything: I could not do this work without Ben.

He has this instinct for the work that is hard to explain until you’ve seen it up close. He notices what needs to be done before anyone says it out loud, and more importantly, he just quietly takes care of it. There’s no performance to it, no need for credit, just a steady, constant presence that makes everything feel more manageable, even when it shouldn’t.

And over time, that kind of presence doesn’t just help, it becomes something you rely on.

He is also my best friend, which matters more than I can really put into a single sentence. And the truth is that the way he shows up for CHSSA is exactly the way he shows up in life: with loyalty, with care, and with a kind of consistency that



Left to Right: CHSSA Treasurer Jennifer Nguyen, CHSSA VP of Curriculum Michaela Northrop, John Stamos, CHSSA President Mikendra McCoy, CHSSA VP of Activities Angelique Ronald, CHSSA Secretary Ben Cummings at State 2025



never asks to be seen but is always felt. He gives so much of himself to the people around him and he does it in a way that is so natural you almost don't realize how much he's carrying until you stop and look. The people who know him best, including his partner John, see that every day.

And in the middle of all of that, he is also still very much Ben. The person I once walked into the tab room at State to find frantically scanning ballots for Nermin while eating a butter, onion, and cheese sandwich on a Hawaiian roll. Just butter, onion, and cheese. No follow-up explanations or ingredients. Which I will truly never understand and will absolutely never let him forget. It was deeply confusing, slightly concerning, and completely on brand.

And somehow, that same energy has existed for years. On a trip we took together to Rome in 2015, he sat in front of a table of seven different desserts he had personally ordered, looked up completely seriously, and declared without even a hint of irony, "I don't even really like desserts."

That is the enigma that is Ben, and part of what makes him so uniquely, wonderfully himself.

What Lasts

Ben's impact on CHSSA is both significant and far-reaching, even if much of it happens quietly behind the scenes.

You can see it in the systems that run more smoothly, the information that is easier to access, and the overall experience that feels more thoughtful and better supported for students and coaches across the state, because his work has helped make CHSSA more organized, more equitable, and more responsive to the needs of its community.

What he has shaped goes beyond systems. Ben has helped shape the culture of this organization in ways that are harder

to measure but just as important. He brings steadiness in moments of pressure, thoughtfulness in moments of decision, and a consistent, genuine care for the people around him, leading in a way that makes space for others and reflects a deep belief in what this activity can and should be.

Part of that comes from the way he shows up fully as himself, which in turn helps create a space where others can do the same and where more students can see that they belong here.

That combination is rare, and it is a large part of why Ben's presence has meant so much to this community over time. Ben has given years of his time, energy, and heart to CHSSA, and his impact will continue to be felt long after any single tournament or season. This recognition is not just well-deserved, it reflects exactly what this award is meant to honor.

