

TWO PATHS, ONE COMMUNITY

In this final issue of 2026, we are delighted to celebrate the recipients of two EAENA awards: Val Gabert, Volunteer of the Year, and Jack McGowan, Achiever of the Year. We sat down with Val and Jack to hear their stories, learn what inspires them to volunteer, and talk about what it means to make a difference in someone's life – even if it is only for a little while, but hopefully for the better. Want to learn more about the EAENA Awards and how we recognize the incredible people who contribute to our community? Visit our awards page: [EAENA Awards](#)

Val and Jack share what it means to keep moving forward, find your community, and help others along the way

This article celebrates two very special members of our community through two awards that EAENA is proud to present each year: the Volunteer of the Year Award and the Achiever of the Year Award.

This year, we would also like to recognize and sincerely thank Dr. J. Kassiri, whose generous donation allowed us to attach a symbolic monetary value to these awards. We know that our volunteers do not give their time, share their stories, or support others because of financial recognition. They do it because they understand the power of community. They know what it is like to live with epilepsy, to face challenges along the way, and to discover how meaningful it can be to offer hope, encouragement, knowledge, and understanding to someone who may be newer to their own epilepsy journey.

A WORD FROM EAENA

Every year, we have the privilege of recognizing people in our community who give their time, share their experiences, and, in their own unique ways, make a difference in the lives of others.

The Volunteer of the Year and Achiever of the Year awards are not simply about accomplishments. They are about the people behind those accomplishments—their experiences, their challenges, their determination to keep moving forward, and their willingness to help others along the way. This year, we are proud to recognize Val as our Volunteer of the Year and Jack as our Achiever of the Year. Their stories are different. Their experiences with epilepsy are different. Their paths have taken them in different directions. Yet, when we spoke with both of them about their journeys, one message kept coming through:

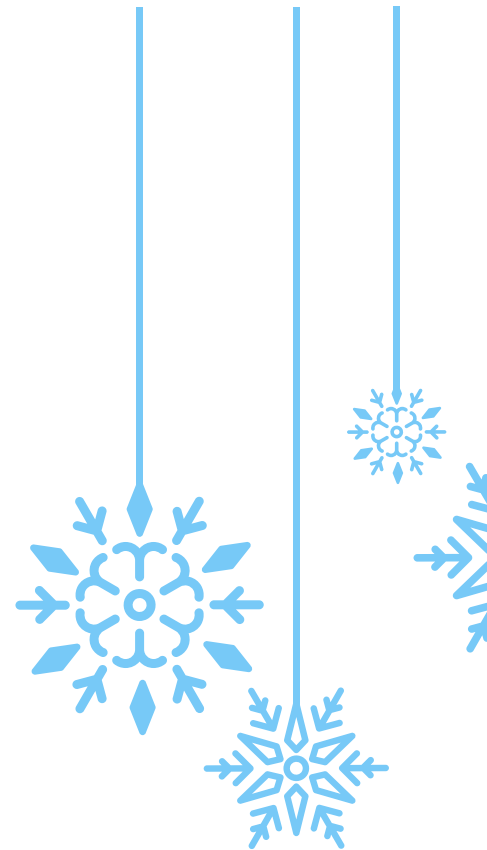
Having the right people around you can make a tremendous difference.

Sometimes, we need someone to tell us, "You can try."

Sometimes, we need someone to say, "Try again."

And sometimes, we simply need to know that we are not alone.

Val and Jack both know what that feels like.



TWO PATHS, ONE COMMUNITY (CONT.)

Their stories remind us that moving forward does not always mean moving quickly or following a straight path. Sometimes, it means taking one small step, finding someone who understands, and then discovering that we have something valuable to offer others, too.

NOW, LET'S HEAR FROM VAL AND JACK

Behind every award is a story—and these two stories are worth sharing. Val and Jack have each travelled their own path with epilepsy. Along the way, they have faced challenges, discovered strengths, found people who believed in them, and learned the importance of giving back. What follows are their stories, in their own words: two different journeys, two different ways of making a difference, and two powerful examples of what can happen when people keep moving forward and become part of a community that supports them. Meet Val and Jack.

JACK: KEEP GOING

If there is one word that seems to describe Jack's journey, it is persistence.

Living with epilepsy brought uncertainty. Like many people, he had questions about what his future would look like and whether he would still be able to follow the path he had imagined for himself. There were roadblocks. There were times when things did not go the way he had hoped. And there were moments when he was not sure what came next. But Jack kept going.

Sometimes, that meant getting back up and trying again. Sometimes, it meant accepting help. And sometimes, it meant taking a different route than the one he originally had in mind. Looking back, Jack recognizes how important the people around him have been. His involvement with EAENA has given him an opportunity to receive support, but just as importantly, to give back. He talks about the importance of having a team around you and being part of a community where people understand at least some of what you are going through.

"It was only from getting back up and trying it again and getting support from the people around me that I was able to continue." Today, Jack is studying psychology at MacEwan University. His goal is to continue into graduate school and eventually work as a counselling psychologist, with a particular interest in anxiety.

He is already gaining experience through his work with the Canada Mental Health Distress Line and as a volunteer with EAENA's HOBSCOTCH memory program. For Jack, these experiences are about more than building a résumé. They are helping him grow personally, academically and professionally—and giving him opportunities to support other people along the way.



MEET JACK

*EAENA Achiever of the Year
Studying: Psychology at
MacEwan University*

*Career goal: Counselling
psychology*

Area of interest: Anxiety

*Community involvement:
Canada Mental Health Distress
Line and EAENA's HOBSCOTCH
program*

*Jack's message: Find the people
who understand what you are
trying to accomplish. And don't
be afraid to step a little outside
your comfort zone.*

TWO PATHS, ONE COMMUNITY (CONT.)

VAL: "IF I CAN HELP ONE PERSON..."

Val's connection with EAENA goes back a long way.

She was introduced to the association by Dr. Starreveld in 1992, and that introduction became an important turning point in her life. Through EAENA, Val began to see possibilities that she had not always been encouraged to see before. Instead of being told what she could not do, she found people who encouraged her to discover what she could do. That stayed with her. And today, Val is often the person doing the encouraging.

You may see her at an EAENA event, at a trade show, sharing her experience, talking with someone who has questions about epilepsy or leading the Seniors Epilepsy Workshop. She is willing to speak openly about her own experiences because she knows that sometimes, hearing another person's story can make all the difference. Her reason for doing it is beautifully simple:

"If I can help one person avoid all the heartache and feelings of not being able to do something... it makes a difference."

Val knows what it feels like to have someone believe in you. She also knows that people living with epilepsy are sometimes faced with assumptions about what they can and cannot do. So, she talks about it. Sometimes people are surprised by what she tells them. Sometimes they tell her they had no idea that people living with epilepsy could do the things she has done. And sometimes, she meets people who still question what someone with epilepsy should be allowed to do. Val doesn't let that stop her. She keeps talking. Because she believes our stories matter. And maybe, by sharing hers, someone else will feel comfortable enough to share theirs.

MEET VAL

EAENA Volunteer of the Year

Passion: Helping others by sharing her experiences

Community involvement: EAENA events, outreach and the Seniors Epilepsy Workshop

What motivates her: Knowing that she may help even one person feel more capable and less alone

Val's message: Get involved.

Share your story. Help where you can. You never know whose life you may touch.



TWO PATHS, ONE COMMUNITY (CONT.)

WHEN THE PATH CHANGES, KEEP GOING

One of the things we appreciate most about Jack's story is his understanding that life does not always follow the timeline we originally imagined. Sometimes graduation takes longer. Sometimes the opportunity we wanted doesn't happen. Sometimes the path changes completely. That can be hard to accept. But a different path does not mean the end of the journey.

Jack has learned to be patient with himself and to recognize that taking longer—or taking a different route—does not mean he has failed. "It doesn't mean that I can't continue down the path that I want to go." Val's journey has taught her something similar. With encouragement from her doctor, she gradually began to understand that there were many things she could do. She could learn. She could teach. She could share. And she could use what she had experienced to help somebody else. "I can do everything that everyone else can do. I can teach people what I have learned. I can share with them my experiences and outcomes."

That kind of confidence does not necessarily appear overnight. Sometimes it comes one small step at a time. And sometimes, it comes because someone else believed in us before we were ready to believe in ourselves.

MORE THAN A TROPHY

Neither Val nor Jack expected to receive their awards. When Val first heard the news, her reaction was very much Val: "Really? Me?" She wondered if perhaps someone else was more deserving. Then she thought about it. Why not her? For Val, the award is not really about the trophy or the monetary gift. It is about being seen. It is about knowing that someone noticed the time she has given, the stories she has shared and the people she has tried to help. And being able to tell her family made it even more special.

Jack was also surprised and grateful. When he first became involved with EAENA several years ago, he certainly did not imagine that one day he would be receiving an award from the organization. Looking back, he sees the recognition as a reminder of just how much can change in a few years. "It's both a demonstration of how significant things can change in just a couple of years, but also the significance that the acknowledgement of others' actions can have on an individual." Sometimes, being recognized at the right time can remind us that what we are doing matters.



TWO PATHS, ONE COMMUNITY (CONT.)

YOUR STORY MATTERS

When we asked Val and Jack what they would say to other people in the EAENA community, neither talked about being perfect nor having all the answers. Val believes anyone can become a role model. You don't need a special title. You don't need to have everything figured out. You simply need to be willing to participate, share what you have learned and help where you can. There are many ways to become involved with EAENA. Some people volunteer. Some attend events. Some share their experiences. Some simply show up and support someone else. Every contribution matters. Jack's advice is a little different, but it comes back to the same idea: find your community.

There are people out there who can provide support, understanding and opportunities. Sometimes, however, you have to look for them. And sometimes, finding your people means taking a small step outside your comfort zone. "It just takes a little bit of looking and it takes the willingness to put yourself in a little bit and maybe a little outside your comfort zone." That first step can be difficult. But it can also open a door.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Val and Jack remind us that there is no single definition of achievement. Achievement can be pursuing an education. It can be working toward a career. It can be volunteering your time. It can be telling your story for the first time. It can be encouraging another person. And sometimes, achievement is simply getting back up and trying again. That is why these awards matter. They recognize what Val and Jack have already contributed to our community, but their stories also remind the rest of us of something just as important: There is always room to grow. There is always room to contribute. And there is always a possibility that our own experience can help someone else.

When one person steps forward, another person may feel brave enough to do the same. And that is how a community grows.

Congratulations, Val and Jack.

And, most importantly, thank you for sharing your stories with all of us.