

## Woman of the Year 2023

# Jewel Ratzlaff

## Innovator and Activist



Jewel grew up in eastern Pennsylvania with five siblings and parents who lived simple lives of service and imbued their home with principles of Christian faith and a focus on others. After graduating from Goshen College, she taught high school math for four years, then studied Theatre at Michigan State University. The next rung on her career ladder included volunteering and working in public radio for several years. In Dutchess County, she became involved in her children's schools, her church, and County Players. She read about the Love INC ministry, which intentionally networked local churches to better support people experiencing poverty in holistic and transformative ways. The approach was inspiring and there were real needs in the community. With support from the National Love INC office and a team of dedicated local individuals, the Mid-Hudson Love INC affiliate opened in Poughkeepsie in 2009. The engagement of many extraordinary volunteers kept the mission growing. Mid-Hudson Love INC now handles over 900 Calls for Help annually, with a volunteer corps of 160+ people from 33 local churches. Together, they offer life-skills classes, mentoring, and delivery of tangible resources such as personal care items and used furniture. Jewel has had the privilege of serving as board chair, furniture delivery coordinator, volunteer coordinator, event planner, teacher, and #1 cheerleader. As the Public Information Officer for the Poughkeepsie Public Library District, Jewel spearheaded the community-wide Big Read project. In her efforts to engage as many as possible in enjoying literature together, she coordinated with high school and college educators, libraries, artists, musicians, chefs, cultural organizations, law enforcement members, authors, and anyone else who could enrich the multiple activities of the Big Read. She helped secure National Endowment for the Arts grants each year and coordinated all the publicity for each event taking place in a 4-6 week period every fall. She was also involved in general community outreach and promotional library materials. She worked closely with the AAUW Leading to Reading project to publicize the importance of reading for all children. To recharge her batteries, she enjoys reading, board games, and directing her church choir.