



2023 Mary Mildred Sullivan Award Dr. Virginia Hart '45

Each year, Winthrop recognizes an alumna for selfless dedication of time, energy and talent in service to Winthrop and others. The Mary Mildred Sullivan Award captures this high honor.

The 2023 recipient is Dr. Virginia Hart '45, a dedicated educator and trailblazer in women's athletics in Mars Hill, North Carolina.

Dr. Hart graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in physical education. Twenty days later, she returned to Mars Hill Junior College, where she spent her first two years of college. In the course of 40 years on the faculty, she continued her formal education, receiving her M.A. in physical education from George Peabody College in 1950 and her Ed.D. from UNC Greensboro in 1976. She took on many roles in her Mars Hill teaching career, including as coach for the men's tennis team, director of May Day programs, planning committee member for Chambers Gymnasium, chair of the faculty development committee, and sponsor of the majorettes and cheerleaders.

Known as the founder of the women's varsity athletic programs at Mars Hill, Dr. Hart coached basketball, volleyball and tennis. She was presented the first Excellence in Teaching Award in 1970 and is a charter member of the Mars Hill University Athletic Hall of Fame. She retired from Mars Hill in 1985.

In 1999, she returned to work in the dining hall, where new generations of Mars Hill students came to know her as "Miss Virginia, the omelet lady." Following some health issues, she retired a second time, in the spring of 2017. During her omelet-making retirement career, she made more than 200,000 omelets!

Dr. Hart has been recognized with many accolades, including the highest honor one can receive as a citizen of the state of North Carolina, The Order of the Long Leaf Pine in 2018. Dr. Hart was presented the award during the North Carolina Association of Student Councils Leadership Workshop, which she helped bring to Mars Hill in 1962. The workshop returns to the campus each summer. As a leader for the North Carolina Association of Student Councils, Dr. Hart could always recognize a "teachable moment," according to one of her admirers.

Other honors for Dr. Hart include: a commendation from the Senate of South Carolina in 2017; dedication of wind screens on the Mars Hill tennis courts in 2017, which are named for Dr. Hart; Mars Hill College Alumna of the Year in 2006; the Mars Hill Golden Circle Award in 2003; and the naming of the Hart Tennis Office in 1955. Of special note was the endowment of the faculty-student research award in 2010, named the Hart-Melvin Archival Research Fellowship for her and a beloved colleague, Dr. Robert Melvin. Its creation was made possible by the Mars Hill Class of 1960 and the National Endowment for the Humanities.



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Of her time at Winthrop, Dr. Hart has many fond memories, including being elected fire chief, playing on the soccer team, assisting in teaching archery, completing her student teaching, belonging to the Baptist student group, walking to church each Sunday and riding her bike around campus.

Dr. Hart has been a beloved professor, coach, friend, advisor and mentor to thousands of students over the past 80 years. She resides in Mars Hill, NC where she celebrated her 100th birthday in May 2023.