



Excellence in Family and Small Business Award dinner, 2025.

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Excellence in Family and Small Business Award Winners Recognized

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The University of Arkansas – Fort Smith Center for Economic Development celebrated ten family-owned and small businesses and individuals at Thursday's Excellence in Family and Small Business Awards at The Bakery District.

This year, the selection committee reviewed 110 submissions from across an eight-county region, spanning Arkansas and Oklahoma. Kendall Ross, associate vice chancellor for economic and workforce development, called the awards a way to celebrate the spirit and achievements of family-owned and small businesses.

Bill Hanna of Hanna Oil & Gas, last year's Legacy Champion Award winner, presented the 2025 award to this year's Legacy Champion, Sam T. Sicard, chairman of the board for First Bank Corp. and First National Bank of Fort Smith, and a fifth-generation banker in the River Valley.

"This is a great group of leaders and business leaders from our community," Sicard said. "I'm very honored that many people whom I respect have recognized me for this award. It's very humbling."

New this year was the announcement of the Jim Walcott Family Enterprise Center Distinguished Service and Commitment Award.

Fred Williams was honored as the first recipient, commemorating his 21 years of support and commitment to the success of the JW FEC, its members, and the community. The award stands alone as a selection by the JW FEC team. Ross said the award is reserved for those who have believed in the Center's vision and have given their time, energy, and wisdom to help shape it.

Joel Manby keynoted the awards. Manby has more than 25 years of experience as a CEO. He believes in leading business through love, humility, and ensuring the success of others. [Read more about Manby's leadership style here.](#)

The winners and a description of their awards are below:

Small Business Awards:

- **Technology and Innovation Business Award:** [Whalen Automation & Integration](#)
 - A small business that demonstrated innovation in its products, services, or processes while achieving substantial growth in operations.
 - **Early Success and Growth Award:** [Perk Coffee House](#)
 - A small business that has experienced rapid success and growth within a short timeframe, achieving milestones such as acquiring customers, generating revenue, or securing funding.
 - **Small Business of the Year:** [Poultry Direct](#)
 - A small business with remarkable growth and sustainability despite limited resources, showcasing innovation and adaptability.
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Family-Owned Business Awards:

- **Emerging Luminary Award:** Brent Jones, [J&B Supply](#)
 - An individual award for a rising leader or emerging talent within a family business who demonstrates exceptional promise and impact within the company and community.
 - **Family Unity Award:** Kindy family – owners of [Crawson Corp](#) in Muldrow, Okla., and [Crumbi Cookies](#) in Fort Smith
 - A family business characterized by strong familial bonds, collaborative spirit, and a shared vision among its members.
 - **Business Renewal Award:** [BHC Insurance](#)
 - A family business for its proactive efforts in ensuring the sustained growth, longevity, and prudent stewardship of assets with a keen focus on securing the interests of future generations.
 - **Legacy Champion Award:** Sam T. Sicard, [First National Bank of Fort Smith](#)
 - This is an individual award recognizing leadership within a family business that exemplifies the highest standards of excellence and contributes significantly to the business and community.
 - **Family Business of the Year:** [Beshears Construction](#)
 - A family business that has demonstrated remarkable contributions to its industry or the local community, leaving a lasting and positive imprint through its endeavors.
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Business Advisor of the Year: Katie Lejong, [Landmark CPAs](#)

- Awarded to a trusted advisor of those mentioned above and other businesses. They are honored for their work in advising or providing resources to either family-owned or small businesses in the community.
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Jim Walcott Family Enterprise Center Distinguished Service and Commitment Award: Fred Williams