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Willie Ashford Named NWRA’s 2026 Residential Driver of the Year

“Coach Willie” and the WM Way of Safety, Leadership and Service

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Long before most people are awake, WM driver Willie Ashford is already on his way to work — often arriving well ahead of schedule. For nearly 22 years at WM's Jackson, Miss., operation, that early start has been part of a routine built on preparation, discipline and pride.

It's also one reason the National Waste & Recycling Association (NWRA) named him the [2026 Residential Driver of the Year](#), recognizing a career defined by safety, professionalism, and leadership in waste collection services.

"I was surprised. I really was," Ashford said. "I didn't expect it, but it was a nice surprise."

Those who know him best weren't surprised at all.

More than a driver: "Coach Willie"

On his route, Willie is known by more than his name. To some customers, he's simply "Coach Willie." The nickname reflects something deeper than service reliability — it speaks to the way he shows up for people.

In recommendation letters supporting his nomination, customers and colleagues described Ashford as:

- A mentor and leader
- Someone who builds trust with communities
- A driver who makes people feel seen, respected and cared for

One former customer wrote that even years after moving away, their family still talks about "Coach Willie." That connection is a key part of what sets Ashford apart — and aligns with WM's commitment to exceptional customer service and community impact.

A career built on consistency and purpose



Willie and his son, Jordan Ashford—now a WM driver—share a fist bump, highlighting a family legacy of safety and service.

Ashford has spent two decades behind the wheel of a WM residential collection truck, building a reputation for consistency and professionalism.

“I don’t look at this as just a job,” he said. “I look at WM as a career.”

That mindset shapes how he prepares each day. He regularly arrives early to the yard, completes careful pre-trip inspections, checks his equipment, makes sure nothing was missed the day before and takes the time to get mentally ready before the route begins.

For Ashford, preparation isn’t about routine — it’s about responsibility.

Leading with safety — every day



Before the truck ever leaves the yard, Ashford gathers his team to set expectations—another daily habit that reflects WM's safety-first culture.

"I tell the guys every day," he said. "I want to get you to the route, and I want to bring you back to the yard."

Throughout the day, he leads like a coach:

- Observing the team for signs of fatigue or strain
- Adjusting crew members' route pace based on conditions
- Encouraging communication and awareness among teammates

If a crew member starts pushing too hard or shows signs of fatigue, Ashford steps in. He slows the pace, calls for a break or stops work if needed.

"I don't want anybody trying to be a hero and getting hurt," he said.

The results speak for themselves. Ashford maintains a spotless safety record — zero incidents and no risky driving alerts — along with consistent adherence to protective equipment standards year after year.

“Safety first isn’t something Willie just talks about,” said Joseph Washington, operations manager for WM Gulf Coast. “It’s how he operates. Same standards, every single day.”



Operations manager Joseph Washington (left) congratulates Willie Ashford (right) beside the truck bearing his name—recognizing a career defined by safety, leadership and excellence.

Trusted by customers and communities

On his route, customers notice Ashford — and they notice when he’s not there.

“When Willie’s not on route, customers ask for him by name,” Washington said. “That tells you everything.”

Ashford takes pride in those relationships. He remembers which residents need extra care, notices when a cart is difficult to move and addresses issues before they become complaints.

“I try to treat people the way I’d want somebody to treat my family,” he said.

That same pride extends to his equipment. Years ago, Ashford's truck became known as the cleanest in the yard — an attention to detail that led WM to place his name on it. The truck has since been used for school visits and community "Touch-A-Truck" events, introducing families to the people behind essential services.

Recognition that reflects a life's work



Photo courtesy of NWRA: Willie celebrates receiving the 2026 NWRA Residential Driver of the Year award alongside WM teammates and senior leaders at the NWRA Awards Gala.

The NWRA Residential Driver of the Year award evaluates:

- Safety performance
- Route difficulty
- Professionalism
- Peer and leadership recommendations
- Sustained excellence over time

"It's about consistency," Washington said, "And Willie sets that standard."

For Ashford, the recognition is both professional and deeply personal.

"This means a lot to me and my family," he said. "WM's been good to us."

More than anything, he hopes the award shines a light on the work WM drivers do.

"What I want people to know," Ashford said, "is that WM drivers take pride in what they do — every single day."

Learn more about WM's commitment to safety, service and community impact [here](#).

<https://mediaroom.wm.com/Willie-Ashford-Named-NWRAs-2026-Residential-Driver-of-the-Year>

