

'How blessed we are'

RACHEL DE LAZZER

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Hamilton is brimming with amazing women and last night nine of them and an organization were honoured.

Thirty-six women were nominated in 10 categories for the YWCA's 2008 Women of Distinction awards at the Hamilton Convention Centre. Judges said choosing winners was tough.

"All the submissions were high calibre," said judge and retired educator Vincenza Travale.

"When I got through with all these, I thought how blessed we are as a community."

New this year was the business, industry and entrepreneurship category, added to broaden the awards' scope and ensure coverage of all areas where "distinguished" women are making strides.

Sandie Heirwegh walked away with the prize in the new category.

Dubbed an "entrepreneur of entrepreneurs" in her nominee bio, Heirwegh has run The Entrepreneurial Edge Inc. for 10 years.

Through workshops and mentoring, the consulting company explains the ins and outs of writing a business plan and putting it into action to those with less money than the average entrepreneur.

More than 3,500 businesses have got a kick-start thanks to Heirwegh tapping into government funding to cover the costs of her services for those who want to use them but can't afford them.

Heirwegh says the provincially funded Self-Employment Benefit program has been the key.

And through funding from the Canadian International Development Agency, she has delivered her services in countries such as China, Bangladesh and South Africa.

Said Heirwegh: "People that come to me are people that have faced challenges and to be able to to play a role in helping them get their lives back on track ... who wouldn't love doing that?"

Christine Smurlick, a small business owner and panel judge, said: "She's always looking for different ways to bring people into business."

Other winners

Health & Wellness

Dr. Alexandra Papaioannou is a geriatrician and professor of medicine at McMaster University who successfully pursued funds to establish a program addressing the link between fractures and osteoporosis.

Volunteerism

Susan Fowler donates 2,000 hours of community service each year. A director and member of the Robert Land Community Association, she was instrumental in the conversion of the old Robert Land School into the Eva Rothwell Resource Centre and in securing a Community Policing Centre for it.

Mentoring and Education

As the executive director of the McMaster Children's Centre, Debbie Crickmore has given hands-on learning opportunities to hundreds of secondary school, college and university students. She has also chaired numerous child and youth associations. She is the author of Raising the Bar on Quality, a quality standards program adopted by the child care centres of 16 communities in Ontario.

Lifetime Achievement

Since arriving in Hamilton in 1970, Judith Bishop has served with numerous groups, including the Social Planning and Research Council and currently Settlement and Integration Services Organization (SISO). She works with the Umbrella Family and Child Centres, Community Advisory Committee for the Early Years (CACEY) and the Best Start Network. She chairs the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board, on which she has been a trustee for 20 years.

Young Woman of Distinction

A Grade 12 student at Highland Secondary School, Nomi Cuneo has spearheaded an operation that gathered toiletries for women's shelters from fellow students, organized lecture series on the Holocaust, and arranged luncheons to recognize Anti-Racism Week. Among the causes she is dedicated to raising awareness and funds for is HAVEN, a school group that promotes non-violence and provides support for third-world countries.

Politics and Public Affairs

Businesswoman Joanna Chapman is called a "visionary" who has affected the arts, environment, politics and community development over the past 40 years. Through her tenacious leadership, more than 50 local historic buildings have been preserved and restored and the Dundas community has obtained affordable co-operative housing for seniors, special needs individuals and families. Her successful fight with former mayor Larry Di Ianni over campaign contributions was not cited in her winner's bio.

Circle of Friends

North Hamilton Community Health Centre has served tens of thousands of women living in neighbourhoods in the city's north end since opening in 1987. It has delivered everything from primary care and award-winning allied health programs to rehabilitation services and innovative health promotion initiatives.

Arts, Entertainment and Creative Energy

Karyn Callaghan merges art and early childhood education in a project unique to North America. The professor of early childhood education brings professional artists to city child care and family resource centres to express their thoughts through art. She recently became Ontario provincial director for the Canadian Association of Young Children.

Community Development and Social Activism

Lynda Lukasik is the founder of Environment Hamilton and has mobilized communities to environmental action through her involvement in the **Bay Area Restoration Council**, WATER (Watershed Action Towards Environmental Responsibility) and Friends of Red Hill. She is also distinguished in the area of women's rights, intercultural relations and social justice.

rdelazzer@thespec.com

905-526-3404