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Honoring Petaluma's finest

Community Recognition Awards honor those who make a difference

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FOR THE ARGUS-COURIER

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Barely a dry eye prevailed in a packed house at the Sheraton Hotel ballroom during last week's 2010 Community Recognition Awards, as Petaluma's 94-year-old Volunteer of the Year, Leota Fisher, slowly, but surely took to the stage to speak to a rapt, standing audience.

A longtime PEP Housing dynamo, Fisher was determined not to let age, a walking frame or severe macular degeneration dampen her spirits or steal her special moment at the podium.

"It has been a wonderful life here in Petaluma," said Fisher, who remarkably maintains an active position on the board of directors for Petaluma Ecumenical Properties, the organization that makes affordable living possible for low-income seniors and people with disabilities.

A former director of nursing and staff nurse at Petaluma Hospice until her retirement in 1994, Fisher was described by award presenter Bill Fishman as "far more than the heart and soul of PEP Housing since 1991. She has been critically the most vital person, past, present and future, in the evolution of a mom and pop housing organization into the best affordable housing company in the country."

A comparative standing ovation was given to the 2010 Citizen of the Year, Judy Collins, in the event co-sponsored by the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce and the Petaluma Argus-Courier.

"Judy has a heart of gold," said longtime friend and award presenter Alice Forsyth of the tireless Food Bank volunteer, Heritage Homes member, original founder of the Petaluma Farmers Market and Petaluma Bounty volunteer recruiter.

"Determined that Petaluma should have a farmers market, despite a lot of opposition at the time, Judy succeeded in establishing the original market here in the A Street parking lot," said Forsyth.

Since the early 1990s, Collins has followed a call to distribute extra produce, originally from the early farmers market to low-income seniors, and later through her pivotal volunteer work with the Petaluma Bounty organization.

Representing St. Vincent de Paul Church in the westside interfaith pantry, this proud breast cancer survivor currently distributes more than 800 pounds of food to a growing number of needy people each week.

"Judy does this out of the goodness of her heart," said Forsyth, "not for the limelight. Her courage, faith, determination and compassion make her a worthy Citizen of the

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Year.”

Pazzo waitress Nicole Watkins received the Service Person of the Year Award for her professional, friendly attitude and signature smile. In Presenting her award, Argus-Courier publisher John Burns quoted a nominating reader, writing of the dedicated single mother as “treating you better than family!”

Police Capt. David Sears presented Walt Spiller with the Police Officer of the Year award in recognition of his outstanding work in traffic enforcement, arresting 131 drivers for DUI violations during the past year.

Fire Chief Larry Anderson introduced the Petaluma Firefighter of the Year, Engineer Juan Carlos Colorado, as being “all about community” and one of the city's finest.

The 21-year Petaluma fire service veteran has received international recognition for his willingness to challenge conventional thinking with innovative techniques and improvements to the service.

McNear School teacher Judy Sovel was awarded the Excellence in Education Award, presented by Richard Marzo of Lace House Linen.

Marzo spoke of the former engineering technician as “a beloved teacher who has dedicated over 17 years of service and is recognized as an outstanding mentor to hundreds of students, their families and fellow teachers.”

Honored as a master in identifying individual students' needs and finding unique ways to meet them, Marzo spoke of Sovel having touched the lives of Petaluma families in profound ways.

Rebecca Scott of PACC Agribusiness Committee heralded Excellence in Agriculture Award winner Mitch Lind of Jerico Products as “a giant in the community for his enormous contributions in giving back to Petaluma as a principal force in the acquisition of Steamer Landing Park and easement along the Petaluma River, insuring river dredging and flood control, as well as supporting groups such as the Kiwanis Club, Hospice and PEP Housing.

Radio personality and regional elder-care expert Kira Reginato was recognized by Saralynn Bowen of the Golden Living Center for her Service to Seniors Award.

Reginato's exceptional ethics and determination to enable seniors to age in place have positioned her as the region's leading authority on elder care. Reginato made a moving acceptance speech, reminding the audience that “elders may move slower, but they know better where they are going.”

David Solo, executive director of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Marin and Sonoma Counties, presented the Service to Youth Award to Geoff Ellis.

“Geoff stepped into the leadership role as president of the board of directors and past president on an executive committee at the Boys & Girls Club in a period of large growth,” said Solo.

Guiding the organization through its expansion into Marin County, Ellis successfully managed a cross-county board of directors, merging two counties, with what Solo outlined as “a steady, sure hand.”

Petaluma born and raised Amber and Jim Balshaw of Preferred Sonoma Caterers received the Small Business of the Year Award, presented by Les Villanyi of the Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce.

“This family-run business gives back to the community in a myriad of ways,” said Villanyi.

“Preferred Sonoma Caterers contributes \$10,000 to \$15,000 in donations each year to schools and nonprofits, even in a down economy,” he said.

Thomas Duryea, president and CEO of Summit State Bank, accepted the award for Large Business of the Year. “I am humble and proud to accept this award on behalf of the Petaluma branch, and strive each and every day to live up to the standards that this award deserves,” he said, crediting branch manager Mary Celestre and her team for their significant contributions to the city’s youth, seniors and less fortunate.

“This top-rated bank has consistently collaborated with community events, fund-raisers and causes, and provided countless volunteer hours,” said award presenter Burns.

(Contact Frances Rivetti at argus@arguscourier.com)

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