

# TRIBUTE!

## YWCA SALUTES SUPER WOMEN

By Terri Finch Hamilton  
The Grand Rapids Press

An educator has more in common with an economic development leader than one might think. Same with an attorney and the president of a 106-year-old music society.

Talk about dreams and the commitment it takes to realize them, about treasured mentors and the passion for a better community, and you talk about the six winners of the YWCA Tribute Awards for outstanding women in Kent County.

After a three-year hiatus, the YWCA this year renewed its award program designed to honor women in the categories of Arts, Business and Industry, Advocacy, Professions and Community Service.

More than 70 names were submitted this year. The last time the awards were given, in 1986, there were 31 submissions, said Diane Martin, public relations coordinator for the YWCA. And she's happy to note that many men nominated women for the honors this year.

The winners will be honored at a luncheon Friday at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. In the meantime, here's a look at six of the area's movers and shakers:

### Birgit Klohs

There's an element of surprise in Birgit Klohs' job that gives her a real kick.



Birgit Klohs, executive director of The Right Place Program, an economic development organization, has brought thousands of jobs and millions of dollars of industry to West Michigan.

The element of surprise, she said, is that she's a woman.

"People are somewhat surprised that in a conservative community like Grand Rapids, a woman holds the top economic development job," said Klohs, winner of the Business/Industry award.

Klohs' latest coup was guiding the German-owned Erwin Behr Company to Alpine Township, where it will build an automotive parts plant.

A native of West Germany, Klohs, 37, has been at the helm of The Right Place for two years, but she has worked in economic development in West Michigan for 13 years.

While others may be surprised that a woman holds her job, she doesn't dwell on it.

"You need to work hard whether you're a male or a female to establish your credibility," she said. "Any good professional person adds to the credibility of the field. This shows a woman can do it — it's proof by example."

She knows that by winning the award, that's exactly what she is — an example.

"Hopefully, some day it will become a normal thing — women in these jobs. It will become a fact of life," she said — and awards like the Tribute honor won't be necessary to prove a point.

She sees an important link between economic development and education.

"When I first started in this field, foreign companies thinking about coming here were most interested



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in taxes and money," she said. "Now their immediate concern is a skilled labor force. In the technological factories of the future, a person not only has to function alongside a robot, but know how to fix it if it breaks down."

What does it take to be a woman who makes a difference?

"A commitment to hard work, and lots of community involvement," she said. "You have to reach out to the community as a whole — not just to your specific occupation."

### Mae Washington



Mae Washington knows that her dedication to her career as principal of City High means a sacrifice in her role as a single mother to her 15-year-old daughter.

"It is a sacrifice to try to do it all," Washington said. "I can't compete with the mother who stays home and bakes cookies, but my daughter gets something different. She sees her mother get up every morning and face the world with a spirit of zeal, and sees her come home every night exhausted, needing some time to collect herself. I have to think that my daughter will be better for that."

Winner of the Professions award, Washington, 40, said she

"found her niche" working with special needs students, from her past work with pregnant teens to her current work with gifted and talented students.

She's big on catching students who fall through the cracks, and hopes one day to see a school for economically disadvantaged students who are gifted, but nobody had realized it because the traditional testing methods failed.

"Our society can be ambivalent to special needs kids," she said. "I want to champion them."

The problems our society is "bombarded with," she said — drugs, homelessness, poverty — can't be solved with the traditional "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" philosophy, Washington said.

"Most people just don't have the bootstraps," she said.

Washington is a fierce advocate for equity in how resources are divided — more goes to the students who test below their grade level than to gifted students.

"Society thinks the gifted kids will succeed anyway — that they don't need help," she said. "That's not true — we need to help them be the best they can be."

That's the joy of her job, she said.

"I feel special about my talents," Washington said. "With every chance I get to foster aspirations of hope, to nurture and foster success, I can see a tangible difference in a successful kid."

### Judith Frey



Judith Frey is quick to point out that she is receiving the Tribute Advocacy award not because of what she advocates, but simply for her work in advocacy.

It seems odd that Frey, one of the state's leading pro-choice advocates, would pass up a chance to talk about a subject that so dominates her life.

But part of being a successful advocate is knowing when and where to champion your cause, she said — and what cause you should adopt in the first place.

"Too many people try to be advocates for too many things," said Frey, 52. "I really think it's more effective to just pick one — you're more able to make a difference that way."

"The important thing to do is pick a thing that gets to your heart, to your gut — something you have a lot of fervor for," she said. "Then talk to people about your cause, and keep what you're concerned about at the forefront of your mind."

But even an expert's recipe doesn't guarantee success.

"There's often a lot of failure along the way," Frey said. "Advocacy is a long, slow process. It can be a long time before you see any change. You have to have patience."

While you wait, you take pleasure in small successes, she said.

"I've tried to bring an awareness and a comfortableness on an issue that was hidden and not really talked about," she said. "I've enjoyed being able to talk about a subject that has strong ramifications, and convince others that it's legitimate and right to speak out about it."

Founder and president of the Issue Network Group, a consulting

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Birgit Klohs

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firm dealing with corporate community relations and corporate giving programs, Frey is happy to note that her interest in advocacy first started with the YWCA, with the Y-Teen program in Cleveland during the 1950s.

President of the club as a 16-year-old, Frey sponsored a summer conference for young people from the inner city, the suburbs and the rural agricultural areas.

"I remember feeling it was important for all of us to better understand each other," she said. "That was really my first experience with advocacy."

## Eloise Johnson



Eloise Johnson, winner of the Arts award, likens her job as president of the St. Cecilia Music Society "to a person setting out on a journey that he wants to finish."

Trouble is, the road is long — maybe never-ending. But the accomplishments she has seen in her six-year tenure at the helm tower tall along her road — tangible results of her tireless efforts.

One of the society's biggest accomplishments is the \$2 million restoration of the historic building at 24 Ransom NE.

Making the building barrier-free was her first goal. That accomplished, she now looks ahead at refurbishing the stage area.

Meanwhile, under Johnson's direction, the 106-year-old organization continues to provide innovative music education — a primary goal.

"The society has moved along with the times — that's why we're alive and well," Johnson said.

Under her direction the group has started music awareness classes for pre-schoolers, and offers babysitting so parents or caregivers can participate.

Two years ago she oversaw the addition of classes for culturally disadvantaged youngsters.

She said she accepts the award "very humbly," and noted that it really is the society, not her, who accepts it.

"You can have all the dreams in the world, but if you don't have people around you to help, you get nowhere," she said. "But the person with the dreams has to be well-grounded, and have certain principles and beliefs.

"Some people who want change do it for their own gratification — you can never do that," she said.

Johnson will accept another award Friday morning, from the West Michigan chapter of the National Society of Fundraising Executives — an award for creative and effective fund-raising strategies, presented on National Philanthropy Day.

A societal trend toward more appreciation of the arts is making fund raising a bit easier, Johnson said.

"I truly believe the arts are becoming more and more valuable," she said. "Thinking people today are taking the arts seriously — they don't see it as being a frill."

## Maria Marino Idsinga

When Maria Marino Idsinga looks back at her life a few years ago, she said her contribution to society "was zilch — or at least very minimal."

As director of the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, now she is making a difference that she sees every day in the eyes of her clients.

"Now I'm in a position where I can contribute," said Idsinga, 38, co-winner of the Community Service Award. "There will come a time when I'll move over and become someone else's mentor so they can take over."

She calls that her "moral obligation," and is already spending time with several young women, talking about how they can contribute to the community around them.

"If I walk out of the center tomorrow and there's no one to take over, I haven't done my job," she said.

Having rarely spent much more than a year or two at the same job, she figured she'd be gone by now.

She has raised the center's budget from \$120,000 to more than \$300,000, started a summer youth program and convinced United Way to fund a community outreach worker to reach Hispanic women isolated at home with children and no transportation — the things she wanted to accomplish when she took the job two years ago.

But Idsinga isn't going anywhere. "My job is not done," she said. "There's a humongous amount of needs that no one else is meeting.

"A lot of what we deal with is due to cultural poverty," she said. "Being poor, not seeing options — or not believing options are there. I

see a lack of hope in too many 18- and 19-year-olds."

It's the dedication and commitment to this community on the part of others around her that convinced her to live here, after moving to this country from Chile when she was 18.

"This is where I want to put my two cents worth in," Idsinga said, "to work to make other peoples' lives better."

## Ann Cooper

Attorney Ann Cooper, co-winner of the Community Service award, doesn't just list her involvement in human and civil rights issues on her resume, said her Tribute nominator, attorney Stephen Drew.



"She doesn't just voice it — she lives it," said Drew, who works with Cooper at Williams, Klukowski, Drew and Fotieo law firm.

Cooper, on vacation this week and unavailable for an interview, has told Drew he was one of the forces that convinced her to become an attorney, he said.

"I remember when we worked on the Community Relations Commission together, I told her with all the energy she had, she ought to be a lawyer," Drew said. "She wants to make Grand Rapids a better place to live — a fairer place to live."

One of Cooper's passions is fighting "systematic unfairness," Drew said, "the type that's built into a system and difficult to recognize, but has a real effect on people."

A good example is race-and-sex bias suit Cooper worked on with Drew this year, defending 21 minority and female officers in the Grand Rapids Police Department who sued the city, claiming they were denied promotions because of flawed testing procedures.

The suit was settled out-of-court in August, with the officers receiving \$325,000 from the city. Now one of Cooper's pet projects is a report for the Michigan Supreme Court's Task Force for Gender Bias in the Courts.

"She gets involved in things not for the glory she gets, but for the work to be done," Drew said.

"Society is still slow in a lot of aspects of recognizing women," Drew said. "A lot of barriers need to be broken down — I find out a lot about these issues from Ann. She's made me more sensitive to the issues of females and discrimination."