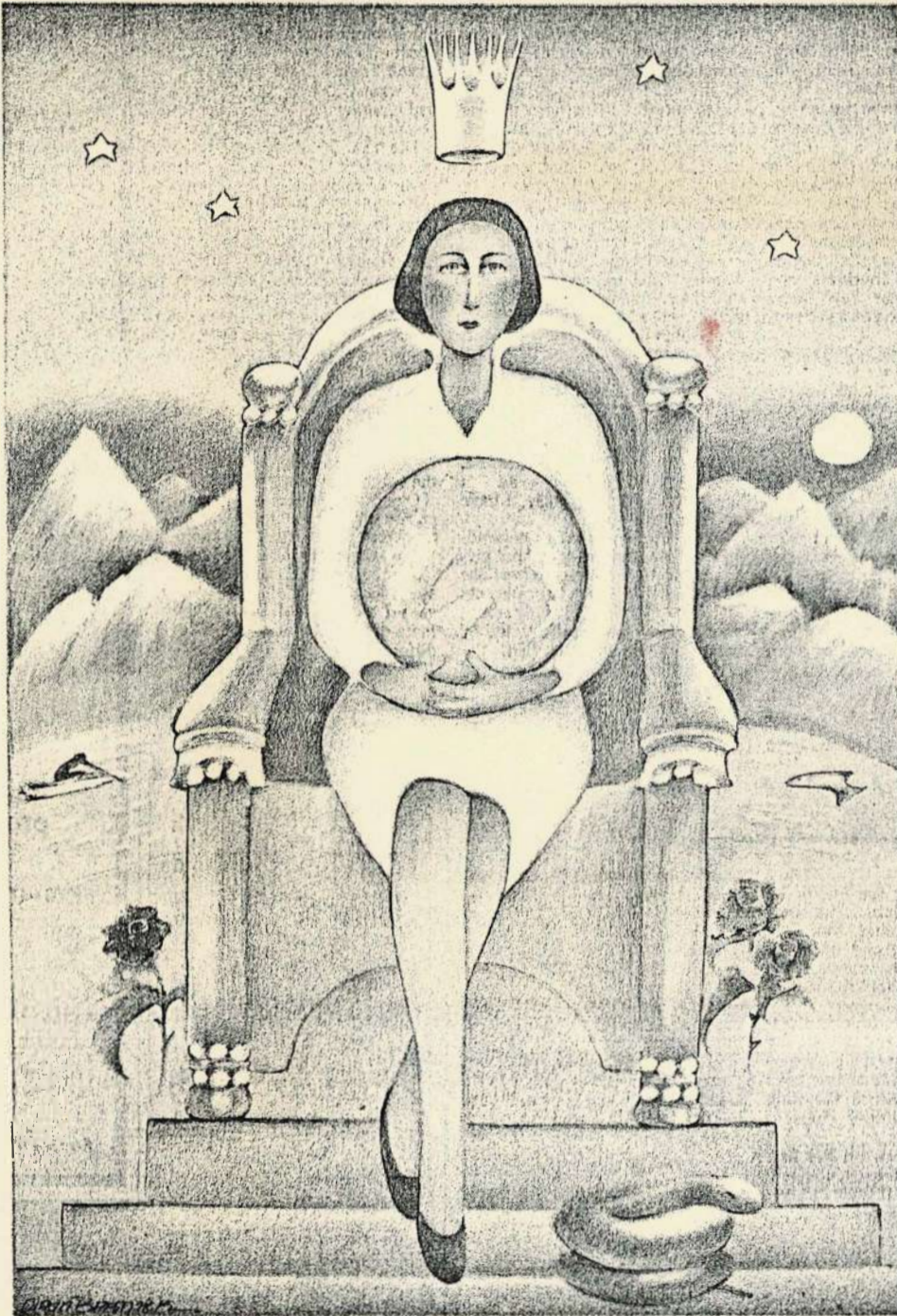


Simply outstanding



PRESS ILLUSTRATION/DIANN BARTNICK

By Terri Finch Hamilton
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They've all made a difference, but you won't find these five women tooting their own horns.

In fact, they're surprisingly humble, each noting that other women equally deserve recognition.

But this year the YWCA Tribute Award goes to them, honoring women's contributions in arts, business and management, advocacy, professions and community service.

"Our society tends to underestimate what women can do, so women themselves often don't feel what they do is worthy of attention," said Diane Martin, public relations coordinator for the YWCA. Sixty-five nominations were submitted this year, and nearly a third were submitted by men, Martin noted.

The winners will be honored at a luncheon Thursday at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Here's a look at five women who have made a difference:

Mary Jane Dockeray

Mary Jane Dockeray was out raking and mulching her yard, answering her mobile phone while watching goldfinch dine from her bird feeder.

"Doing physical labor, I find, oils the gray matter," Dockeray said, chuckling her trademark hearty chuckle.

Outdoors, after all, is where Dockeray, should be. Winner of the Professions Award, Dockeray, 63, joined the staff of the Grand Rapids Public Museum in 1949. She designed and planned the Blandford Nature Center and was its naturalist-curator from its opening in 1968 until she retired last June.

As a child she collected bugs, flowers and lots of rocks. As curator of Blandford, she opened the world of nature to thousands of visitors a year. Anyone who wanted to know what to do with an abandoned bird knew to call Mary Jane Dockeray. They still do.

Dockeray is heartened by the surge of interest in the environment. Her interest dates way back before it was trendy to recycle.

"When I talked about conservation and environment issues back in the '50s, people would say, 'Oh, c'mon.'" Dockeray said. "I was considered an alarmist. Fortunately, enough people didn't consider me a lunatic, a kook."

Interest in the environment has been "smoldering," Dockeray said.

"People back in the '50s started lighting little fires — I like to think I lit one — but there weren't enough people to fan the flames. But now some of the flames have caught."

Dockeray came indoors often enough to serve on a variety of boards of directors, including the Michigan Audubon Society, The Michigan Parks Association, Indian Trails Camp for Handicapped Children and the West Michigan Environmental Action Council.

She left the nature center with the satisfaction of introducing hundreds of thousands of children to the outdoors she loves so much.

"People today come with very little background about nature," Dockeray said. "It used to be moms and dads had the background to pass on, but they don't anymore. Sometimes even the grandparents don't. We're getting farther and farther away from the land."

Catherine Comet

When she traveled to Russia last summer, Catherine Comet was told she "has a Russian soul."

Comet, music director for the Grand Rapids Symphony, laughs at the recollection, both pleased and a bit befuddled.

"They say you can't explain it," she said.

It's no mystery to anyone who knows Comet, winner of the Arts Award, that she puts her soul — Russian or otherwise — into her work. Fiercely dedicated to the orchestra, Comet is emphatic that the Tribute Award goes not just to her, but to the symphony.

The YWCA Tribute Awards honor women who are among the best at what they do, enriching our community with their talents, time and tenacity.

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AWARDS

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Comet has received national attention as one of the country's most prominent female conductors. She assumed a prestigious part-time role this fall as music director of the New York City-based American Symphony Orchestra.

Her travels as a guest conductor afford her the opportunity for comparison.

"You lay a brick, and when it's set you put another one on top of it," said Comet, 44. "I've seen many, many orchestras in other parts of the country that are crumbling down because the bricks were not laid the proper way. That will not happen here."

Comet knows the children of today are the adult music-lovers of tomorrow.

"You cannot deprive a child of the arts — it's one of the most important contributions of mankind," Comet said. "Just as you take a child to the museum or show him paintings, you must expose a child to music. I think music is the most important," she added slyly, "but of course, I'm prejudiced."

As the mother of a 13-year-old daughter, Comet believes children should have good role models.

And what about her stature as a role model?

"Me?" she laughed. "I don't know about that. I'm lucky enough to be able to live my life making music, and I'm a mother and a wife."

She paused after that statement.

"I don't know which order I would put those three. Conductor, mother, wife? Wife, mother, conductor?" she asked herself. "But it's quite fulfilling."

Comet's formula for success is surprisingly simple.

"What you believe in is important, then share it," Comet said. "The orchestra is all about sharing. We don't exist in a vacuum. We only exist when we're heard."

Yvonne Sims

Yvonne Sims remembers an evening 20 years ago when she was hosting an Urban League Guild meeting at her home. Her 3-year-old son was excited — he had heard

about all these meetings his mom and dad attended so often, and finally could get a peek.

Perched in anticipation at the top of the stairs, he looked down at the group of adults sitting and talking, and a look of disappointment crossed his small face.

"This is a meeting?" he scoffed.

Sims, principal of the Kent Education Center's Oakleigh Elementary School and winner of the Community Service Award, laughs at the recollection. Her son, now 23, is a teacher and an active volunteer in his Tampa, Fla., community. "I never really tried to encourage him to volunteer — I'm surprised that he does," she said.

She shouldn't be surprised. By her example and exuberant recruiting, Sims has convinced many to volunteer.

"They think people who volunteer have all this expertise," she chuckled. "That's just not true."

"It's a self-esteem kind of thing. You volunteer if you think you have something to offer."

Sims, 53, has offered much.

Her community service dates to her teen-age years. She volunteered with the Red Cross rolling bandages and making Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets for nursing homes, and was a hospital candy striper. "It made me feel good, but I didn't realize it was something I would continue," she said. "I don't know how many great truths come to you as a teenager."

Over the years her volunteer efforts have included work at the Sarah Allen Family Neighborhood Advisory Board, United Way, the Coalition for Representative Government, Community Mental Health, Child Guidance Clinic, D.A. Blodgett Services for Children and Families.

She's most involved lately in the National Issues Forum, a series of community discussions and debates on current issues.

Everyone has something to offer, Sims firmly believes. "But you have to hook them up to something," she said. "Just telling them to go out and volunteer is not giving them any direction."

Jeanne Englehart

Jeanne Englehart's friends have

told her she's a type E personality: trying to be Everything to Everybody.

"I have to start looking at things in a broader sense and not have blinders on so I'm just looking at the business," said Englehart, 39, president of Englehart Training Centers, a computer training firm. Englehart will receive the Business and Management Award.

Her unyielding commitment turned her business from a small consulting company in 1984 to a firm training more than 5,000 people annually, from companies including Steelcase, Herman Miller, Upjohn, Eaton and Westinghouse.

She credits her success to hard work and integrity: "When you're ethical and you do a good job, people reward you with their loyalty."

Englehart has achieved widespread recognition. She was selected Career Woman of the Year for 1989/90 by both the Greater Grand Rapids chapter of the National Association of Career Women and its national organization.

Her interest in computers was sparked in 1982 when she developed a computer training department for ComputerLand Stores in Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. In 1984 she set up a similar program for Grand Rapids Junior College Occupational Training Center.

Englehart was convinced there was a market for an independent training company to serve the computer needs of business and industry. But her pursuing her vision has necessitated grueling hours.

"When I tell people I work 80 hours a week they look at me like I'm crazy," said Englehart, who has a son in college and another attending high school in Detroit.

"When people tell me, 'Jeanne, you have to slow down — all you are lately is your business,' I have to listen," she said.

While her business has expanded like wildfire, she has all but given up fond pastimes like exercise and reading. She sees her parents in Northern Michigan only about once a year — and is distracted by business when she does visit.

"The business is growing, and right now I have to be here all the time," she said. "But it isn't always going to be this way. I'm going to slow down."

Ellen M. James

Ellen James thought she was just going to pay the young parking attendant as she headed for home last election night.

Then she asked the young man if he had voted. No, he responded. He didn't know who to vote for. Besides, he said, his vote didn't really make a difference.

"I told him I was sorry I didn't talk to him earlier," recalled James, 47, winner of the Advocacy Award. "I told him how important his vote was, that it's a right that didn't just happen."

Did her speech make him feel bad?

"I hope it did," James said. "I hope it did."

It was five years ago that James, a contract compliance officer for the City of Grand Rapids, assembled a group of people from the black community to discuss how to boost minority participation on the Grand Rapids City Commission.

It wasn't long before the group had a name: the Coalition for Representative Government.

The CRG has encouraged political awareness and activity in minority communities. The group has endorsed 10 candidates for election to the City Commission, school and library boards and the 61st District Court. All CRG endorsed candidates have been elected to the offices they sought.

While the majority have been black, the CRG has endorsed and worked for others sensitive to minority concerns.

"I think the Coalition has helped bring a lot of racial harmony between the minority community and white community," James said. "There's been a lot of support from the white community."

One of the group's goals is to increase voter registration and participation among the young.

"I don't see the same enthusiasm for voting as I did when I was 18," she said. James, who has a perfect voting record, said the social climate of the '60s may have made a difference.

"When you see people getting beaten and hosed and dogs biting them, it has an impact on you," she said. "Young people today aren't part of the same struggle."