

# Women's work. . .

## Is rarely done better than by these five

*The winds of enthusiasm, perseverance and compassion originated in different places, but have helped each of five women soar to success. The women are winners of this year's YWCA Tribute Awards, presented in the categories of advocacy, art, community service, professions, and business and management. Profiles of the winners begin on this page and continue on page D2.*



PRESS ILLUSTRATION/DIANN BARTNICK



Virgilia Wade

## Disadvantaged children, families have a strong ally in Virgilia Wade

By Terri Finch Hamilton  
The Grand Rapids Press

Virgilia Wade remembers the fear and distrust in the eyes of the young inner-city mothers she wanted to help two decades ago.

But in Wade's eyes was understanding and determination, and the dream she had for a haven for single parents materialized with her hard work.

Wade, 75, wins the Advocacy Award. She has focused her professional and volunteer work on im-

### ADVOCACY

proving conditions for disadvantaged children and their families. In the late 1970s, through her work at the Grand Rapids Child Guidance Clinic, Wade developed the Neighborhood Drop-in Center at 506 Eastern SE. The center offers enrichment experiences for young children and socialization for their parents.

"These were the children of

mothers who were so overwhelmed, depressed, felt so alone," she said. "There was no way we could reach them. They were across town, in foreign territory. They didn't know us or trust us. They were fearful.

"We felt if we could just give them some support, let them feel pleasure in raising their children instead of feeling they were a burden. They loved their kids, but they were on the edge."

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"More than anything else I want to show my students how much a part of life art really is."

Peggy DePersia



"You burn out faster when you're not prepared. You don't leave anything of value."

Patricia Pulliam



"I couldn't let what he had turned into a wonderful business just go away. Suddenly I had to do it all."

Betty Burton



"My greatest joy is to see a woman move, grow, develop . . . It's so exciting."

Margaret Voss



# Crisis brings plunge into business

The Grand Rapids Press

When Betty Burton left the familiar haven of her elementary school classroom for the unfamiliar world of business management, her friends and relatives assured her, "You can do it."

"And I found out that, indeed, I could," Burton said.

Burton, winner of the Business and Management Award, overcame great personal challenges to assume management of a family-owned business, Wonderland Business Forms.

Burton's husband, Johnny Burton, started the business in 1981, running it from a guest bedroom in the couple's home. During the early years her contribution was mostly providing support for her husband.

"I'm an assertive person, but I had always taken the back seat and let my husband be the final decision-maker," said Burton, 50. "I was the wife who didn't pay the bills or do the banking or take care of the insurance."

That ended in 1987 when they



Betty Burton

## BUSINESS

discovered Johnny was suffering from a serious heart condition. Betty took a leave of absence from teaching elementary school and spent 10 months filling his shoes. He recuperated and Betty returned to teaching, but he suffered a debilitating stroke in January 1990 that left him paralyzed and unable to speak. Betty had to decide whether to sell the business and continue teaching or assume the monumental task of managing a productive company — knowing her husband couldn't share his knowledge.

She decided to take the challenge.

"I couldn't let what he had turned into a wonderful business just go away," she said. "Suddenly I had to do it all, not just at home, but for the business."

She drew on skills honed during her years of teaching.

"I'm convinced the greatest manager in the world is a person in charge of an elementary school classroom," Burton said with a laugh.

She learned some hard lessons fast, she said.

"I found the business world was entirely different," Burton said. "I'm very much a people person, and often in the business world that's the last thing people are con-

cerned about. What matters is the cost factor, the bottom line."

Her husband's stroke recovery "is nothing short of miraculous," Burton said, but he isn't active in running the business because of his weakened heart.

"He gives me wisdom and knowledge, ideas and direction," she said. "And when I get home at night he's there waiting for a full report."

Civic-minded and socially responsible, Burton is an active member of First Community A.M.E. Church and has served the community on numerous panels, committees, community groups and professional organizations.

Burton loves anything that has to do with kids and their enrichment, and she loves the arts. She and her husband have three children.

Every week she tutors two young students and occasionally speaks to elementary school students about black history and career development, returning to the classrooms that she loved so much.

"For my own therapy, and because many teachers don't teach it, I do this," she said. "It's good for me and I know it's good for the kids."

And it's good for the kids to see this determined woman, who has discovered a way to overcome any obstacle that comes her way: "I refuse to say, 'I can't do this.'"

# Career is devoted to opening doors

The Grand Rapids Press

Margaret "Bunny" Voss's career is marked by firsts, but a couple of them escaped her memory recently. She never set out to be a trail blazer, she explained, "I just did what had to be done."

Voss is winner of the Community Service Award. Former Dean of Students at Davenport College, she was the first woman president of the Economic Club, a luncheon club for businesspeople, first woman chair of the governing board of Fountain Street Church, and a founder of the Women's Resource Center.

She was former executive director of the Methodist Community House, a social agency for underprivileged children and senior citizens that started the first licensed day care center in Grand Rapids.

She was the first dean of women at Davenport, then the first dean of students. And she's an ordained



Margaret Voss

## COMMUNITY SERVICE

Congregational minister, a goal that took 40 years to achieve because of limited opportunities for women in the clergy.

"I'm really a behind-the-scenes kind of person," Voss said. "I'm not comfortable out front, but I am a worker."

Voss was out front when she sued Davenport College in May 1988 after ending a 25-year career there, claiming she was demoted from her dean's position because she was older than 65. They settled the sex and age discrimination suit in April 1989 with an undisclosed monetary award.

But the issue of discrimination isn't settled, in Voss' mind.

"The community hasn't progressed the way I would like," she said. "There's still discrimination in the corporate world. There aren't enough opportunities for women to move up. It's hard out there."

She's grateful for the opportunities she had at Davenport College.

"I hope I was fair and honest with the students," she said. "I know I was a role model. I took a stand when somebody had to take a stand."

Voss' husband of 47 years, Lawrence, died in August, a loss she still feels deeply. She has three adopted children and five grandchildren.

She runs her own counseling office, doing therapy and career counseling. She also teaches business and liberal arts courses at Aquinas College and Grand Valley State University.

Voss lights up when she talks of the rewards in working with people.

"My greatest joy is to see a woman move, grow, develop," she said. "To see someone who has low self-esteem, who feels she has no skills, to grasp ahold, a light comes on in her face, creativity comes out. It's so exciting."

Even more exciting, she said, would be seeing more women blossom.

"I see a hesitancy in the women I meet," Voss said. "We're still the nurturers, and this is to be valued in us. We need nurturers. But we also need women to stand up and move out."

Women need more "support groups," she said, chances to meet and talk and bond.

"Then the enthusiasm will come," she said. "Then the strength will come."

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# Nourishing the arts is a way of life

The Grand Rapids Press

## ARTS

Everyone who has been touched by the talent and enthusiasm of artist and teacher Peggy DePersia can thank one of her college professors.

"I hate to say it, but I didn't plan to be a teacher," confessed DePersia, art teacher at City High-Middle School and winner of the Arts Award.

"Teachers had such an impact on me, keeping my enthusiasm alive, but I honestly thought I would be an interior decorator."

She never made it to the world of fabric swatches and paint chips. A

college professor suggested DePersia get a teaching certificate "as a back-up," she said. As soon as she graduated, she started teaching at Ottawa Hills High School — the first of her teaching assignments in the Grand Rapids district.

An accomplished artist, DePersia's skills have touched all levels, from right in her building at City High-Middle to the community, state and nation.

She was one of 35 nationwide participants in a six-week summer program sponsored by the Nation-



Peggy DePersia

al Endowment for the Humanities, spending three weeks at Ohio Wesleyan University and three weeks in Florence, Italy, studying art and art history of the early Italian Renaissance.

She leads the art committee at Fountain Street Church, fostering an appreciation of the arts through shows there.

She was an elementary art consultant for the Grand Rapids Public Schools before she came to City High-Middle. DePersia, 44, has taught every grade from kindergarten to 12th, and has several teaching awards.

"More than anything else I want to show my students how much a part of life art really is," she said.

The integrated curriculum at City High-Middle steers her lesson plans, with a humanities focus that inter-relates art, history and literature. But DePersia's creativity and imagination take it from there.

She includes African, Asian, European, Indian and American cultures in her teaching. Students do interpretive drawings of gods and goddesses, Navajo clay pottery, quilting samples from early America, miniature Indian paintings, chalk drawings of Dante's "Inferno."

DePersia is an outspoken advocate of the arts in this time of state cuts to art funding.

"People advocating the arts have to take a defensive posture, trying to justify the necessity to people who think other needs are more important," she said. "Arts have always been relegated to the back seat, pulled out if there's more money, more time."

Fortunately, her school strongly supports the art department, she said. Art isn't an elective course, but a mandatory part of the curriculum.

Married 21 years, with a 12-year-old son and 17-year-old daughter, DePersia said most of her time is eaten up by work, family and her work at Fountain Street Church.

She wishes she had more time, she said, "to open her big mouth" about the tragedy of funding cuts to the arts.

"By nature I'm an optimist. I like to think of things working out well," DePersia said. "I just can't think about the arts being neglected — they're so essential. I'm hoping the pendulum will swing back."

She does her part to nourish art. "I don't think about it consciously as I go to school every day, but I am trying to keep art alive through these kids, to assure it will be around in the future."

"I see some delightful situations where students have done things that really surprise them," DePersia said. "Seeing kids discover new ideas and express themselves in ways they didn't know they were capable of is very exciting."

## WADE

CONTINUED FROM D1

Those mothers are still out there, she said, feeling even more desperate.

"They're hurting a lot more now with public assistance being cut so far down," Wade said. "They really can't make it, wondering if they can pay their rent, or if they do, if they'll be able to eat."

A pioneer in local programs for infants, Wade is an outspoken advocate of early preventive mental health programs. She helped start the local chapter of the Michigan Association of Infant Mental Health.

She also was instrumental in founding a West Michigan chapter of the National Association for the Education of Young Children. And she was at the forefront in studying single mothers' needs for child care, presenting a report on the subject to the Kent County Department of Social Services and United Way.

Wade never married and has no children, and she doesn't quite know herself why she became so concerned about children.

*"Children are so vulnerable, so dependent on their environment and their early experiences. Our society talks a lot about how much we love our children, but we don't put any of it into action."*

Virgilia Wade

"Maybe it's because they're so helpless, maybe it's because I have a strong sense of justice," she said. "Children are so vulnerable, so dependent on their environment and their early experiences. Our society talks a lot about how much we love our children, but we don't put any of it into action."

She did most of her advocacy during her 19-year career at the Grand Rapids Child Guidance Clinic, working as a counselor with mothers and babies in an infant intervention program and as associate director of the clinic's preschool child development center for 12 years.

She retired from the clinic in 1982 and promptly joined the League of Women Voters of the Grand Rapids Area. She's now co-president.

"When I left Child Guidance, I

said the most important thing I can do now is get out there and do some real lobbying, some real advocacy," Wade said.

She learned about her legislators and laws and faithfully attended local DSS meetings. She wrote letters, made phone calls, went to Lansing.

That more people aren't outraged at recent cuts in programs for the state's most needy "is pretty frustrating," Wade said.

"The thing I have become more and more convinced of is that the public doesn't really know what's going on. They don't understand the pain and misery being caused out there. If the public were aware, they would have demanded that our state take its responsibility," she said.

"It has to change. If it doesn't, we're lost."