

FLAIR

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

A fitting Tribute: YWCA adds sports category to its awards

The woman winner will be an athlete who encourages others

By Terri Finch Hamilton
The Grand Rapids Press

They've been doctors and nurses, teachers and naturalists. But no star athletes needed apply — until now.

The prestigious YWCA Tribute Awards adds a new category this year — sports and fitness. It will honor a woman who excels in sports or fitness and promotes it in others.

The YWCA has discussed adding a sports and fitness category for several years, said Carla Blinkhorn, YWCA executive director. Now, on the heels of an Olympics that saw female athletes shine, seemed the perfect time.

"We're seeing the first generation of girls brought up under Title IX,"



Blinkhorn said, referring to 1972 federal law that gives girls and women in high school and college equal opportunities in

sports. "Women are now competing in a professional and semi-professional level, and there are many women out there contributing to their development."

That part is key. A woman can't win this award simply by being a great athlete.

"A woman has to contribute to qualify," Blinkhorn said. "Maybe she coaches Little League or girls' basketball. Maybe she volunteers at Special Olympics."

Sports and fitness meshes well with the YWCA's mission to help women who have been abused in a relationship or sexually assaulted, Blinkhorn said.

"A life history of taking good care of yourself physically — eating right, exercising — impacts self-esteem, which impacts recovery from domestic violence or sexual assault," Blinkhorn said.

Women who are confident and feel good about themselves are more likely to leave an abusive relationship

before the violence escalates, she added.

The Tribute awards, started in 1977, are presented annually to local women for outstanding achievement in a variety of areas. In addition to sports and fitness, the categories are: arts and communication, business, management and industry, community service, advocacy, professions, student.

Individuals and organizations are invited to nominate women for a Tribute award. Nomination forms are available at the YWCA Center for Women, 25 Sheldon Blvd. SE. Call 459-4681 to have one mailed.

Nominations are due to the YWCA by Sept. 13.

Winners will be honored at the Tribute Awards luncheon Nov. 13 at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel. Tickets, at \$40 a person, typically sell out.

Keynote speaker will be Diana Sieger, president of the Grand Rapids Foundation.

WORTHY OF DISTINCTION

Winners of YWCA awards don't hesitate when it comes to helping others

The Grand Rapids Press

One wears bright red shoes to draw attention away from herself when she has to speak in public. People notice her anyway.

One uses humor and truth to help others — and herself — deal with breast cancer.

One wakes up at 2 a.m. to reach for a pen, to put her powerful thoughts on paper.

They are strong, funny, thoughtful, determined, artistic, powerful.

They're the winners of this year's Tribute! Awards, given annually by the YWCA of Grand Rapids to honor our community's outstanding women.

Six women are recognized for their accomplishments in: advocacy; arts and communication; community service; professions; business and management; sports and fitness. In addition, a 17-year-old will be honored in the student category, both to recognize her achievements and inspire her to continue to excel.

They'll be honored at a noon luncheon Wednesday at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel, with nearly 800 people attending. Tickets are sold out, and YWCA officials report a record number of area companies — 74 — lending financial support.



PRESS ILLUSTRATION/ED RIOJAS

PROFESSIONS



Valerie Simmons

As head surgery nurse in the cardiovascular intensive care unit of Houston's Methodist Hospital, Valerie Simmons helped save lives.

"It was technical, skilled and very intense," says Simmons, 41.

The cardiovascular ICU treated very sick patients from around the world.

"It was very rewarding," Simmons says. "I loved what I was doing. And I wanted to leave it that way."

But where do you go from there? Simmons headed for the University of Houston School of Law.

During her first year of law school, she continued to work full-time at the hospital. "I was a zombie," she says.

"I loved law school. It was like being paid to do something I would do for free. I would read till 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning."

While visiting a friend in Grand Rapids, she attended a cocktail party where she verbally sparred with U.S. District Judge Benjamin F. Gibson. Impressed with her legal mind, the judge offered Simmons a summer judicial clerkship in Grand Rapids.

Upon graduation in 1988, Simmons accepted an associate position with Warner, Norcross & Judd here.

Under the guidance of Tom McNamara, a partner at the firm, Simmons thrived. Her legal mentor even accompanied her to her first deposition and hearing.

"He critiqued my performance. He was a wonderful teacher," says Simmons, now a partner at Warner, Norcross & Judd.

Although McNamara died during Simmons' second year at the firm, he bestowed on her an everlasting legacy. "He believed that you have to find excellence within yourself."

Through her membership in the Grand Rapids, Floyd Skinner and Michigan State bar associations, Simmons has worked to uphold the integrity of her profession.

But her first love is working with kids. Her house is always full of kids — a collection of her daughter's girlfriends and their boyfriends. Her daughter, Tisha, is now a student at Clark Atlanta University in Georgia.

"In another life I must have had a dozen kids. I was probably the Old Lady in the Shoe," she jokes.

Simmons gives unselfishly to public and charter school organizations. But her most cherished work is with the Grand Rapids Service Corps — an urban peace corps with young people aged 17 to 24 who commit to one year of community service.

"This is a vehicle for personal development," she says.

Simmons seeks personal growth through travel and reading. After doing

two-stints in Saudi Arabia with a cardiovascular surgery team in the early '80s, Simmons caught the wanderlust bug.

"England, Netherlands, Italy, France, Germany, Egypt and the Caribbean Islands," she counts off.

On Sunday afternoons, Simmons might curl up with a historical romance, crossword puzzle or put on rap music.

"When you work as hard as I do, you need stress release."

— Staff reporter Jaye Beeler

ADVOCACY

Call it Diane Zarafonetis' Litany of Life: Think positively. Live well. Love life. Tell the truth.

"Advocacy means being honest with someone," says Zarafonetis, 49, founder of Expressions for Women, a breast cancer support group. "People dance around the word 'cancer.' When I talk to a woman with breast cancer, I don't sugar-coat it."

"I say, 'Yeah, this is tough stuff. You may die from it. But chances are, you won't. You'll be a wife, a mother, a PTA president.'"

The group she founded in 1988 out of her own frustration blossomed beyond her wildest dreams. It has 171 members. They've connected with close to 2,000 women with breast cancer.

"At the beginning I expected women to come, get supported, get well and get on with their lives," Zarafonetis says. "I didn't realize it would grow and grow into such a phenomenal group."

Now it bears her name: The Diane Z. Breast Cancer Support Group. The logo



Diane Zarafonetis

includes Zarafonetis' personal signature. So does the group.

Members visit women as soon as they're diagnosed, offering information, support, friendship. Zarafonetis says she had nothing like that when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1985. It was tough. So is she.

"They gave me 18 months to live," says Zarafonetis, married to Jim and mother of Marcus, 23, and Jaime, 20. "I said, 'You're all wrong — you've got me in the wrong column. I have things to do.' Here I am, 11 years later, still kicking and screaming."

When her hair fell out during numerous bouts of chemotherapy, Zarafonetis just wore bigger gold hoop earrings, brighter red lipstick and dusted her scalp with powder to keep down the shine.

She continually bolsters women to take charge of their own health, to listen to their intuition, to ask questions of the healers in white coats.

She was the first woman in West Michigan to undergo a controversial procedure called a peripheral blood

stem cell transplant, in 1993, when her cancer came back. It rejuvenated her bone marrow so her body could withstand extremely high doses of chemotherapy.

Zarafonetis knew she might die anyway. But the procedure might buy her some time. It did.

But a year and a half ago, the cancer was back, this time throughout her body, from her scalp to her spleen. More chemotherapy. More dire predictions.

"I ran into a nurse at the mall the other day and she said, 'Diane! You're still alive!' " She grins. "Some people might think that's a tasteless thing to say. I loved it."

She calls her work with the support group a privilege. She recently turned over the presidency to Bonnie Hamlin and now attends the meetings, the second Wednesday of each month at DeVos Center for Women and Children, as a member.

Inspiring by example, Zarafonetis continues to take charge of her life.

When her oncologist recently suggested a new chemotherapy, delivered every 17 minutes around the clock through a fanny pack strapped around her waist, Zarafonetis tried it for two weeks then disconnected it, miserable from side effects.

Still, she jokes. "You can never find shoes to match those fanny packs."

When morbid thoughts about her disease uncharacteristically consumed her a few months ago, Zarafonetis shook them by planning her own funeral, right down to the postlude: "I Feel Good," by James Brown.

"I could die tomorrow," she says, "but I always bounce back, like a bad penny."

— Staff reporter Terri Finch Hamilton



Caroline Crawford



Barbara Green



Cathy Large



Kyle Irwin



Karen Sterk

See profiles of these YWCA Tribute! winners on Page J2

TRIBUTE! Awards recognize diverse ways talents are used for good

STUDENT

Northview High School senior Caroline "Carrie" Crawford is trying to change her world.

Whether she is planning a homecoming dance or giving away \$20,000, she's making a difference.

Crawford was appointed to the Young Women for Change Committee, a group of young women asked by the Michigan Women's Foundation to distribute money for programs to help other girls. After determining criteria, the girls sat down and decided how to divide \$20,000.

"We wanted to serve," says Crawford, 17. "It was a real learning experience. I learned about grant-writing, philanthropy."

Through the Western Michigan Learning Initiative Committee, Crawford helped make decisions with doctors, educators, business and industry people and other students. The committee put together a long-distance cardiopulmonary resuscitation training class.

"We reached 600 kids instead of a class of 30," says Crawford, a National Honor Society member who maintains a 3.8 grade point average.

Crawford is exploring a career in elementary education. Through Northview High School, Crawford is cadet teaching, which is a similar to student teaching. For a couple of hours a day, Crawford works with elementary-age students. "It's a good experience," she says.

Crawford has discovered that travel is also a good teacher. As a color guard in the school marching band, Crawford went to seven European countries last summer during a two-week performance tour. Crawford also plays the flute in the symphonic band.

"The drawback was we could only have one suitcase, which we had to put our uniforms in," Crawford groans.

With her mom — her best friend — at her side, Crawford visited many majestic places, including Rothenburg, Germany.

"It's a walled city that looks like something from the 16th century. It's very quaint," she says.

Crawford draws inspiration from Max Colley, Northview High School band director, who postponed hip replacement surgery to train the students for the state marching band finals at the Pontiac Silverdome last month.

"He's had such an influence on all of us," Crawford says.

Whether she's spelunking in Kentucky's Mammoth Cave or snagging a line drive on the softball field, she gives it her best.

"Everything means more your senior year," she says. "I've had a lot of fun."

— Staff reporter Jaye Beeler



Caroline Crawford

SPORTS & FITNESS

Karen Sterk had only two job prerequisites. "I wanted a job where I didn't have to wear a bra or high heels," says Sterk, 42. "I wanted to be able to teach people how to move."

After earning her master's degree in exercise physiology from Michigan State University in 1983, she created Change of Heart.

"So many women aren't in touch with what they can do physically," she says. "I wanted to have a place for women, a little place that we can come and shut out the world. Change of Heart is that safe haven."

Located at the Panopoulos East complex at 2345 Burton SE, the fitness center offers stretching and strengthening, step and low-impact aerobics classes along with workshops such as tai-chi, yoga, self-defense. She even finds time to write a monthly column for "Metropolitan Women," a lifestyle magazine circulated throughout the state.

Sterk, who has taught 15 classes a week for 12 years, is drawn to this. "I'm very physical. This is my outlet," she says.

As a kid, the former high school cheerleader took tap, jazz and ballet classes. Sterk still feeds the creative cavity in her soul.

Through keeping a journal and re-reading



Karen Sterk

Julia Cameron's "The Artist Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity," Sterk energizes her spirit.

And she has always done so.

As recreational director at Michigan Dunes Correctional Facility in 1978, Sterk released that creativity.

There was the time a renowned University of Michigan dance teacher and her dance troupe visited the prison and danced across the cafeteria.

"The prisoners got up and did that African dance," Sterk says.

Another time she organized a big concert and the local Sheldon Cleaners donated tuxedos for the prisoners. "They were excited to put those clothes on and they gave a performance," she says. "Their families were so proud."

Sterk has channeled that creative energy into helping others feel good about themselves.

She and her husband, Ron Warren, often hit the beach with their daughters, Marjani, 10, and Kaliya, 7. "We like going to the beach when nobody else is there," she says. "It's our time."

And that's Sterk No. 1 message: Make time for yourself.

"When you take care of your body, you feel better, you have more energy and you sleep better," she says.

"Many people say: 'I don't like exercising.' Well, I don't like brushing and flossing my teeth, but I do it because I want to have teeth."

— Staff reporter Jaye Beeler

COMMUNITY SERVICE

When Kyle Irwin has to speak in public, she puts on her bright red shoes with the crazy buckles.

"That way," she says, "I figure people will look at my shoes instead of me."

Too late. Irwin is everywhere, and despite her best efforts, people are noticing. It all started two decades ago when she realized she was using the East Grand Rapids Library a lot, getting books for her sons and going to its programs. It was only fair, she thought, to join the Friends of the Library and give a little back.

Soon she was on the board. Then the county library board.

Then a friend got her involved in rehabbing rooms for Dwelling Place.

"One thing leads to another," says Irwin, 44, married to husband, Win, with five sons, ages 10 to 20. "It's my continuing education."

She's passionate about her volunteer work with the Children's Assessment Center, a one-stop service center for children who have been sexually abused.

She calls it "horrifying, but gratifying. You know you're doing the right thing."



Kyle Irwin

She has served on boards of the John Ball Zoo, the Grand Rapids Opera, Citizens for Child Advocacy, the YWCA and the Grand Valley State University Foundation. She has worked with the Women's Resource Center, serves on the advisory council for Dwelling Place Transitional Housing and helped found the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council.

"For the first time I've got some real hope," she says. "I'm seeing people working together, talking, breaking down bureaucracy."

She involves her family in her community service, from her parents to her sons, who have helped her repair rooms and move furniture for people who live in the Dwelling Place low-income housing.

"They need to see the people of Heartside as real people," she says.

There are times, she says, that she's wished "can't somebody else pick up the torch and run with it?"

But the firm believer in the power of hugs keeps going back. Through her church, St. Mark's Episcopal, Irwin coordinates a monthly dinner for the residents of several transitional housing programs for women.

"You realize the power of relationships," she says. "These women are without so much. What brings them back is the same thing we all need — to know that somebody else cares. We all need cheerleaders."

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— Staff reporter Terri Finch Hamilton



Diane Zarafonets

BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT & INDUSTRY

A year in the Philippines was like nothing a kid from Ada could imagine.

When she was 16, Barbara Ann Greene was an exchange student, who lived with a politically active family in Manila.

"The dad was campaign manager of a candidate opposing (President) Ferdinand Marcos," she says.

With her host family, Greene traveled the countryside campaigning against the authoritarian Marcos regime. Her experience rivaled a dime-store novel, including a narrowly missed bomb explosion. "It was an incredible experience," she says.

Ever since those hair-raising days, Greene has tried to right the wrongs of this world.

As the president of the Direction Center in Grand Rapids, Greene is trying to level the playing field. A resource for non-profit organizations, the center counsels 80 organizations, offers seminars, workshops and training and fields hundreds of telephone calls.

"We get the questions answered," says Greene, 44. "Sometimes we just listen to a CEO vent or help a board craft a policy framework or design a performance review process."

Other times the answers are more simple. "Sometimes they call for directions and we give them to them," she laughs.

There is one question that Greene poses to every organization: How do you know what kind of difference you've made?

"In non-profit, good work is not enough," she says. "We need to measure the impact. We need to make certain we're good stewards."

Greene, a former associate executive

director of YWCA of Greater Flint, relocated to Grand Rapids to run the Direction Center in 1992. She and her husband, Todd, have one daughter, Jennifer, and two dogs. She also sits on the boards of the North American Indian Center of Grand Rapids and the Council for the Performing Arts for Children.

A couple of years ago, Greene — along with City Commissioner George Heartwell and former Urban League President Rodney Brooks — took on the city of Grand Rapids. In a meeting with Mayor John Logie and City Manager Kirk Kimball, she and the two others made sure that \$100,000 marked for core-city economic development made it there.

"To their credit they listened and worked with us. I was impressed," Greene says.

The money went to the Grand Rapids Urban League's Micro-Loan Fund, which helps individuals start small businesses out of their homes.

After she helped settle that issue, she moved on to the Grand Rapids School Board in 1995.

"They wanted to improve and grow. They wanted to work together as a team," Greene says.

That's something Greene knows like the back of her hand. Her life is a team effort.

— Staff reporter Jaye Beeler



Barbara Ann Greene

ARTS AND COMMUNICATION

When a student came to her crying one day early in her teaching career, upset that he couldn't read, Cathy Large gave the boy a pep talk and found him a tutor.

Then she went home that night and wrote about it. If something moves you, if you feel it, if it matters, write it down, Large says. It's called poetry.

Large, 46, is director of multicultural education and gender equity for Grand Rapids Public Schools. At least, that's the official title of the confident, thoughtful author of 39 plays, 128 poems and a book about racism.

"I am first a woman who writes," she says, "who happens to be employed as a school administrator."

Large has coordinated performing arts activities for area school districts, colleges and churches and has led drama activities for inner city young people.

Married to husband, Ernest, with two children, Eric, 17, and Markeith, 21, she wants kids to discover the power of words.

"Writing is therapy for me," Large says. "It allows me to be free. No one can take it from me, no one can impede on my thoughts. I write whenever an idea comes — which is usually about 2 a.m."

She takes on racism, homelessness, AIDS. Schools use her plays to teach cultural identity and self-esteem. Her church, New Hope Baptist, uses them to minister.

"My job as a writer is to help people with

the here and now," Large says. Her first play, "The Charge," written in 1978, deals with the legacy a dying mother leaves to her five children.

"They weren't supposed to rise above poverty, but they believed their mother that God and education are the most important things in life," Large says. "They all went on to college."

"It can be done. Circumstances aren't enough to keep people from rising."

She knows. Large grew up in Mississippi, one of 13 children of a single mother. Even at age 9, as she stood picking cotton, she knew she wanted to write a book about her mother.

It took her a while to muster the courage.

"I used to have reservations about revealing things about myself," Large says. "That I lived in poverty, that I wore second-hand clothes, that sometimes I wished I was white."

"But good poetry is not that rhyming stuff. It's writing what you really think, what you really feel — about anything."

Her latest play, "Friends Forever," deals with how racism is taught at home, both by blacks and whites. She expects to produce and present it soon, probably at Ottawa Hills High School.

She says she feels she owes something to kids. She established the Cathy Large Education Award in 1990 for two minority female students to be awarded \$1,000 scholarships, the money generated from the production of her plays. Large sends her own money twice a year to 10 college students she has tutored and bolstered since junior high school. Some have told her they got to college because she believed in them.

For Large, that's poetry.

— Staff reporter Terri Finch Hamilton



Cathy Large

Women honored for efforts

► *The YWCA Tribute luncheon recognizes contributions made to the community.*

By Amber Veverka
The Grand Rapids Press

When Grand Rapids Foundation President Diana Sieger was growing up, her mother and her mother's friends gathered for regular bridge games, munching on chocolate and talking for hours.

At the time, Sieger thought it was corny. But today she and her own best friends do the same relationship-building — in tap dance classes that are followed by over-supper chats.

No matter the venue, women need to make room for friendships that nurture and strengthen, she told a record crowd of 811 at the ninth annual YWCA Tribute luncheon at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel Wednesday.

"Be proud to be a woman, with all the strengths we have, and the frailties of humanness," she said. "We need to support each other more than ever while we challenge each other."

Sieger's keynote address followed awards to the seven Tribute winners, women recognized for their community work, for doing the very nurturing and strengthening Sieger prescribed.

There was Diane Zarafonetis, who built a support group for



PRESS PHOTO/KATHY KIELISZEWSKI

Diana Zarafonetis, left, and her daughter, Jamie, hug after being honored at the YWCA Tribute luncheon at the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel.

women struggling with breast cancer. In the video clip shown before Zarafonetis accepted her award, she held out one arm, jangling metal bracelets. She wears 12, one for each year she's lived since her diagnosis.

Zarafonetis said that because of all she's experienced and the help she's been able to give others, she "wouldn't have missed (the disease) for the world."

Cathy Large, another winner, spoke in her video interview about the bridges she wants to build between people through the plays she writes and work she does with Grand Rapids Public Schools students.

"(There are) those who don't see the degree of racism in this city; that's a tragedy," said Large,

director of GRPS multicultural education and gender equity. "I think if I can be a bridge in bringing people together and if I can do that through plays, that's fine. If I can do that through dialogue, that's fine. But I think I can do my share."

Tribute winner Valerie Simmons, an attorney and partner with Warner, Norcross & Judd, said she's learned to use her particular strengths in achieving the career she's always dreamed of — instead of trying to mimic someone else.

"In order to be a successful attorney — and that is true, whether you're male or female, black or white — it involves a certain amount of work," she said. "There are things I bring to the table as a

professional black woman that are of value and that others don't bring."

The winner of a new Tribute category, sports and fitness, said she believes her purpose in life is to encourage women to become more physically fit.

"If I'm 105, I want to be able to walk, ride bike, lift weights, see, read, be social," said Karen Sterk, owner of Change of Heart exercise and fitness studio. Sterk has served on boards and in organizations that promote women's fitness.

Other Tribute winners were Barbara Greene, president of the Direction Center; Kyle Irwin, community volunteer; and Caroline Joy Crawford, senior at Northview High School.