

The Grand Rapids Press

A packed house is expected at noon Thursday in the Amway Grand Plaza Hotel when the YWCA of Grand Rapids honors six outstanding local women and a remarkable student with Tribute Awards.

Tribute is the YWCA's biggest fund-raising event and last year raised nearly \$60,000 for the Domestic Crisis Center, services for sexual assault victims and child-care and health programs.

Cost for the luncheon is \$50 per

person. Some seats may still be available. Reservations are required. Call Francesca Amari at 459-7062, ext. 532.

This year's honorees are Mercedes Toohey in advocacy; Sharon Mack in arts; Juanita Briggs in business, management, industry and labor; Mary Williams in community service; Patricia Gardner in professions; the late Katharine Ann Talus in sports, fitness and wellness, and student Le Nguyen.



tribute!

*YWCA honors 7
who join a sisterhood
of community service*

This year's YWCA Tribute winners stand out in color amid a collage of past honorees. At left, top, from left, are Juanita Briggs and Patricia Gardner; middle, Katharine Ann Talus and Le Nguyen; bottom, Mercedes Toohey, Mary Williams, Sharon Mack.

See their stories on pages D4, 5 and 10



Mercedes Toohey

Advocacy



Mercedes Toohey sprang into action helping local Hispanics almost as soon as she set foot in town.

It was time for the 1980 census and Toohey, 60, read in the paper the census office wasn't hiring Hispanics, because they couldn't pass the test.

"I went down there the next

day, took the test and passed it," Toohey says. She was hired as an administrator, started tutoring others and hired a raft of Hispanics to help take the census.

Passionate about helping her people, Toohey seems to be everywhere Hispanics need a hand — tutoring youngsters, lobbying commissioners, organizing long lines of Mexicans waiting for ID cards.

She's one of the founders of Clinica Santa Maria, a clinic of St. Mary's Mercy Medical Center housed at the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan that treats Hispanics, many of whom speak no English.

"Our people weren't going to the doctor," Toohey says. Pregnant women were receiving no prenatal care, she says, simply showing up at the hospital emergency rooms when it was time to have their baby.

"Our big fear was what do we do if nobody comes?" she says. "The first month, we had 60 people. Now, we have 60 people daily. It's such a sense of accomplishment."

She feels that a lot. Toohey has kept Latino students from dropping out of Grand Rapids Community College by starting a support group there. When she tutored struggling Hispanic students at Franklin Elementary School in Grand Rapids, their math scores improved by 40 percent, she says.

Toohey has two grown children with her husband, Jay, and five grandchildren. "But a teacher who has 34 students — how can she do that? All of us have to go help out."

A native of La Paz, Bolivia, she has taught at the American

Cooperative School in Bolivia, worked for the U.S. Embassy in Bolivia and worked as a counselor at Grand Valley State University.

She was instrumental in bringing together the Hispanic Center of Western Michigan, a once failing organization, and Catholic Human Development to form a successful nonprofit center that helps Hispanics with job and housing issues and provides translation and youth programming.

"We were criticized a lot for that," she says. "Hispanics accused us of selling out to the white Catholics."

"Pride doesn't help you run a business. We needed their help to stay alive."

She started a business, Languages and Culture Institute, with a partner, Gladys Cortez, a retired teacher. They teach Spanish and English, tailoring their lessons to each student's needs.

Funds have been slashed for adult education, she says, and the lines stretch down the block when Grand Rapids Public Schools offers English as a second-language classes.

"The need is so great," says Toohey, but work schedules prevent many from taking English classes. Her goal is to get into workplaces to teach English to workers on site.

"I see need," Toohey says. "I see the language barrier. I see people putting them down. I hear people say, why don't they learn English? Well, I challenge them to come to me after working from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m. and tell me if they have the energy to learn Spanish."

— Terri Finch Hamilton

*'The need is so great. ... God gave many people a lot.
If you can give, you should give.'*

PRESS PHOTO/ANNA MOORE BUTZNER

Sharon Mack scrolls over to look at a century-old terra cotta cherub to remind herself of the tough and tender journey that led her to this place where music soars.

"This is why I'm here, really," says Mack, 45, executive director of St. Cecilia Music Society, as she peers through glass at the salvaged clay cherub that used to adorn the outside of the 111-year-old building.

She used to take long walks downtown, studying the beautiful architecture of the city's historic buildings.

"One day, I walked past and saw these terra cotta cherubs holding onto musical instruments," Mack says. Fascinated, she tried to get into the building to see what it was, but the door was locked.

So Mack crossed the street to the Grand Rapids Public Library and spent the whole day reading about the history of the St. Cecilia Music Society.

A week and a half later, she read an ad in The Grand Rapids Press for a part-time receptionist at St. Cecilia.

"They were so surprised I knew so much about St. Cecilia — I was actually correcting them on some things," Mack says with a laugh.

She was hired in August 1997. By March 1999, she had worked her way up to executive director. She manages a budget of more than \$750,000, a full-time staff of six, develops programs and raises money.

It's all the more amazing to her when she thinks back to who she was when she took the job.

She fled Marshall 10 years ago and an abusive husband.

"It was a life-or-death situation," Mack says, and it's still hard for her to talk about. "I opened the door of my home, walked out and didn't turn back. And when I did that, I really walked away from my identity."

She was editor of the Marshall Chronicle newspaper and heavily involved in the community there, she says. She ended up in Grand Rapids to start her life over.

"I was ego-battered, big time," Mack says. "I had this devastating feeling of shame that was a terrible burden. I knew I needed to grow. But I felt undeserving of anyone's kindness."

She worked at a deli, a book store and a coffee shop while taking classes at Aquinas College.

A longtime lover of the arts, Mack didn't have money for tickets to the symphony or the ballet. She called their offices to tell them she wanted to go, and they gave her tickets.

"I had to be resourceful in a way I didn't know I could be," she says.

"The hardest three words in the world to say are 'I need help.' Asking for help reveals to people that you don't have it all together."

Slowly, she's put her life back together and also helped St. Cecilia flourish.

She has restructured the organization, revamped fundraising and expanded programs, including adding Kindermusik for toddlers and the New Horizons band for senior citizens.

She loves telling about how the toddlers in Kindermusik race up the stairs after their classes to dance to the music of the senior citizen band practicing.

"Wonderful things happen in this building," she says. "You can see the joy that music evokes."

"The real challenge for us is building the brand of St. Cecilia," Mack says.

"We no longer want to be that quiet little organization on Ransom that only families in good standing used to belong to. We want to throw our doors wide open and give everyone a taste of what we have to offer."

They have a lot, from youth

orchestras and choirs to concerts featuring world-renowned performers.

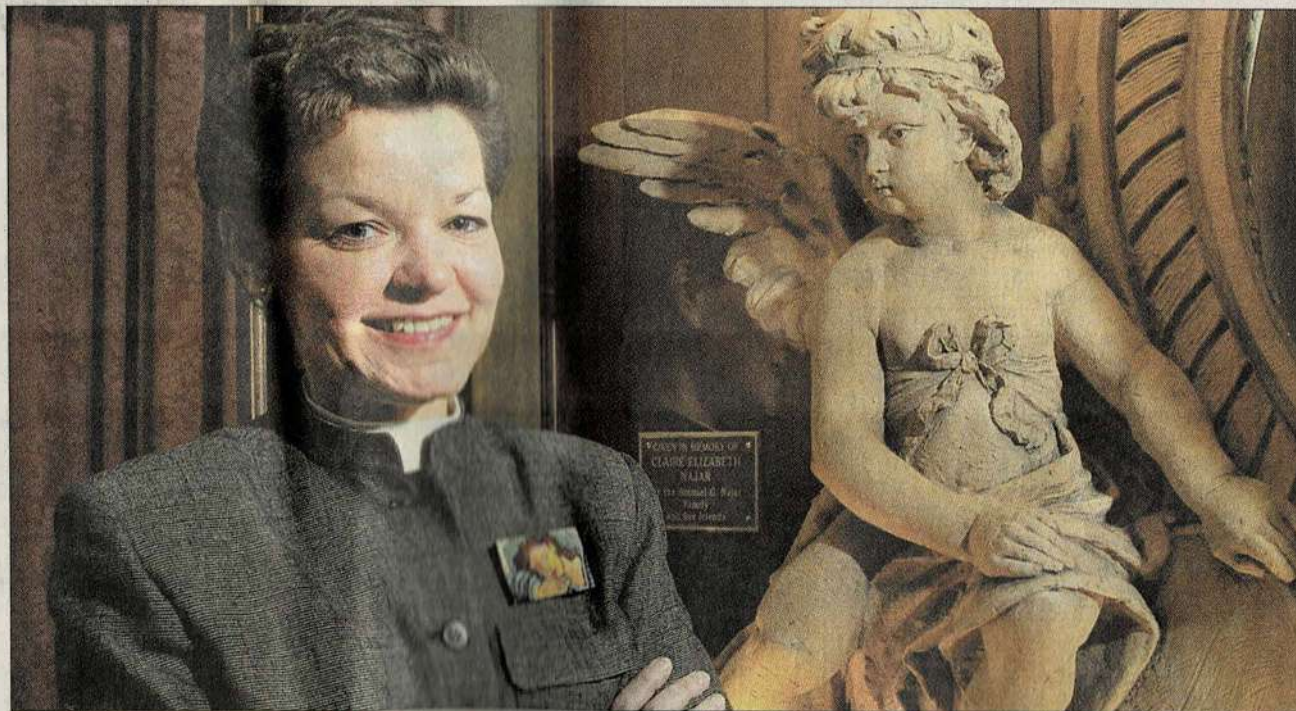
"I walk up here when the symphony is rehearsing, sit in a chair and just float," Mack says.

"The arts are healing," Mack says with a smile. "Especially for me."

— Terri Finch Hamilton

Sharon Mack

Arts



'In difficult times, I've always used music to get me through. It can transport me to a different space, let me see things from a different perspective. Nothing does that like music.'

2004 TRIBUTE WINNERS

Juanita Briggs

Business, Management, Industry & Labor

Juanita Briggs has this philosophy on how to build a business: "You have to let people help you."

She knows, because there was a time when she needed help. After starting at the bottom, working her way through part-time clerical jobs for various companies and spending her

nights taking college courses, Briggs finally reached her dream job as a senior product manager for Herman Miller.

"You quickly figure out the action is where the product is," she said. "It's a real good job. I loved it."

Then in the mid-1990s, faced with declining sales, Briggs' bosses told her to begin outsourcing the office furniture she was selling. In 1995, with her product lines manufactured elsewhere, Briggs was among 174 Herman Miller employees whose jobs were eliminated.

"It was hard," she said, "because I had such a passion for my products. I didn't want to leave them. I was going to miss my products and my friends."

Her layoff stirred an entrepreneurial spirit that had been building in Briggs since childhood. Growing up in Grand Haven, she'd found innovative ways to make money. She'd buy candy and gum and sell them to classmates. She'd pick strawberries and sell them to neighbors.

"I always wanted to be an entrepreneur," she said, "but I guess I needed that little push."

She began thinking of the products she'd outsourced to a company in Canada. Why not start her own company to assemble those products — "my babies," she called them — in Zeeland?

But how do you start a new manufacturing enterprise, particularly when your experience is in sales? Remarkably, Mogens Smed, owner of Smed International in Calgary, the company to which Briggs had outsourced her "babies," was more than willing to give them back.

He taught her the secrets of furniture manufacturing, encouraged her, even put her on his payroll. Briggs still chokes up about it but adds: "I always say, let people help you."

She mortgaged her house, used her severance pay to buy equipment, rented factory space, hired a couple of former co-workers who also had lost their jobs and, four months after her layoff, made a presentation to her old employer.

Two months later — December 1995 — she began assembling and shipping products for Herman Miller.

She named her company Valor Industries.

Within six months, sales went from zero to \$10 million.

Not that all has been smooth sailing since she founded Valor Industries. Briggs has tried to stay ahead of the market by seeking new customers. In 2000, she and Graham Howe started Inegricoa, a powder-coating business. She later founded Valor Nichols, a joint venture with another firm offering one-stop shopping for boxes and packaging materials. Two years ago, she started Valor Boxes, custom-making cardboard boxes.

Among her companies, she has about 50 employees, though she has been forced to lay off some.

"It just breaks my heart," she said. "I love what I do. I just don't like the economy we're in. It's a heavy responsibility."

Since going out on her own, Briggs has helped three people start their businesses.

"People say, 'Hey, I want to do this. Can you help me?'" Briggs said. "I had mentors who helped me. That's why I say, 'Let people help you.'"

— Pat Shellenbarger



PRESS PHOTO/KATY BATDORFF

*'I love what I do. I just don't like the economy we're in.
It's a heavy responsibility.'*

When she retires to Arizona in a few years, "then I'll probably get out the knitting needles," Mary Williams said.

No one who knows her believes it. Williams admits she's not the type to ever really retire.

"I wouldn't mind going back to school," she said.

Wherever Williams goes, judging by her history, she's likely to become involved in community activities.

Williams, 62, has given her time to countless charitable causes, many organized through her Delta Sigma Theta sorority. She has chaired the sorority's Cotillion-Beautillion, a coming-out dinner for young, black men and women held every two years.

The two dozen or so high school students must have a 3.0 grade point average and agree to attend six months of workshops every Saturday in financial aid, entrepreneurship, spirituality and other subjects.

"We're down there every Saturday waiting for them," Williams said. "We've made that commitment, and we expect them to make that commitment."

Last year, the sorority gave eight scholarships of \$1,000 each. Many of the program's participants have gone on to colleges — Florida State University, Grand Valley, Western, Michigan State, among others.

Williams helped the sorority develop the Delta Centre for Arts and Cultural Affairs to educate the community about African-American heritage. She has produced plays for Women's History Month and Black History Month, including "The Legacy of African American Women," in which she, with no acting

experience, played a part.

"I was scared to death," she said, but added, "I got into it. I had never done anything like that before. It's such an empowering experience for women who've never done anything like that before."

Her primary concern is fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS. She has stood on street corners in Grand Rapids, handing out condoms and literature and asking passersby, "Have you been tested lately?"

"It's really a passion of mine, because it is hitting the young people at such an alarming rate," she said.

"Young people think they're invulnerable. We have to be realistic and understand young kids are not going to abstain. We are really going to have to get a grip on this."

Williams is a founding member and past president of Weaving Ethnicity, an organization dedicated to dispelling stereotypes.

When the New York native and her husband, Don, moved to Grand Rapids in 1980, it was a bit of a culture shock.

"There were things I did not like," she said, such as the segregation between the city and the suburbs and the culture in the schools.

She and Don, who became a dean at Grand Valley State University, set out to improve things by volunteering their time, while running a home-based marketing business. Since then, they've seen a lot of change in Grand Rapids, enough that their three children intend to raise their families here.

As for Mary and Don Williams, they plan to retire in a few years and move to Arizona, leaving a potentially large void in Grand

Rapids. Mary believes the void will be filled.

"What you do as you're doing these things is you're reaching back and pulling others up to help," she said.

— Pat Shellenbarger

Mary Williams

Community Service



PRESS PHOTO

'What you do as you're doing these things is you're reaching back and pulling others up to help. Hopefully, they'll be here when things need to be done.'

Patricia Gardner

Professions

It's 4 p.m. on a recent Friday. A Kent County Circuit Court staffer has walked into 17th Judicial Circuit Court Judge Patricia Gardner's office to tell her the guardian of a foster child she's ordered police to pick up for buying a car without a driver's



PRESS PHOTO/JON M. BROUWER

'If anything, I wish I could be on another 12 or 20 boards. I wish we could do things a little more, a little better, a little faster.'

license is wondering if it can wait until Monday.

"No," Gardner says with the shake of her head before covering her face with her hands. "It just terrifies me, because I'm afraid he's going to get hurt or kill someone."

Being a family court judge is equal parts law and parenting.

"I don't become his mom," Gardner says of the teenager, whose mother is dead and whose father is "not available."

"But part of what the community expects is that I'll make common-sense decisions on his behalf. When I found out about the car, my reaction was 'Oh, no he didn't!'"

Gardner, 46, was born in Detroit and remembers tagging along to work with her father, a practicing attorney for 50 years. She has been practicing law for 21 years, the last seven as a family division judge.

The University of Michigan graduate with a Wolverine mousepad on the desk in her courtroom — "I love U of M football," she says — got her start in front of judges in 1983 as a court-appointed attorney for juveniles.

"I loved it, and I fell in love with the kids," she said. "You get to know the children so well, and the parents and the grandparents and the aunts and the uncles."

A mother of two, Gardner has become a tireless advocate for children and their families, as well as an avid joiner of boards and committees charged with issues of child welfare, Hispanic youth and education — she's half Mexican — and the revitalization of downtown Grand Rapids near her Heritage Hill home.

"If anything, I wish I could be on another 12 or 20 boards," she said. "I wish we could do things a

little more, a little better, a little faster."

Especially when it comes to kids. She admits she has cried tears of joy presiding over adoptions and tears of sorrow over neglected children. She also admits she's thought of adopting more than one of her most heart-wrenching cases.

"I have had to say to parents, 'You have to pick drugs or your child,'" she said. "Sometimes I think 'Oh, heck, I'll just take the kid home, I have an extra room.' The child can't wait."

Gardner's commitment to kids goes beyond the courtroom. Five years ago, she started The Late Show program, in which volunteers read bedtime stories to children in the Kent County Juvenile Detention Facility.

"It's a scary time for them, whether they're in there awaiting a court hearing or foster care," she said. "Many of them have never had a parent read them a bedtime story. Many of them have never had parents."

She also started an Independent Living Closet, which provides donated household goods to juveniles who have been through the court system and are ready to strike out on their own.

Gardner is humble about receiving the Tribute award.

"Being a lawyer from at least half a minority background and being a woman and working with families and kids, I see what I do as a privilege," she said. "And with that privilege comes a major responsibility not to frame your work within an eight-to-five business day."

"This is a profession that calls you to give back. If you were to interview the next 10 or 20 judges who walked into my office, you'd see I'm not so unique."

— Morgan Jarema

2004 TRIBUTE WINNERS

The “stomp-stomp-stomp, step-step” outside her classroom was nothing new to Laurie Summerfield — just another student running in the hallways at Lowell High School.

That always meant Kathy Talus was at it again — coaching another track prodigy on a day too cold and snowy to be outside.

Talus, who died last summer at 48, stared down cancer for 15 years, all the while teaching, coaching and inspiring.

“She was always the one that got us going,” says Marsh LaHaye, who hired in at Lowell with Talus in 1979, “and even through all the chemotherapy treatments, she never would ever complain. She wasn’t going to let cancer take her spirit.”

A piece of that spirit still lives in the people Talus left behind.

“From the get-go, Kathy was good at eyeing up potential in a student,” Summerfield says. “She was so good at taking a kid who might want to be a sprinter and convincing that student that, if she became a hurdler, Kathy would turn her into a conference champion.”

Case in point, Natalie Kent.

“I ran the 200- and 400-meter events, but I remember her coming to me as a sophomore and telling me that hurdles would be my best event,” recalls Kent, a 19-year-old sophomore at Aquinas College where she still runs hurdles. “And I remember being so afraid, because I was used to the track being open when I ran — not with 10 hurdles in the way.”

But Kent, who became a two-time conference champion and has her sights on being a college All American, overcame that fear with Talus’ help in the long hallway outside Summerfield’s room.

“I still use things that she taught me,” Kent says, “but the biggest thing was to have

confidence in myself. Miss Talus taught me that I had to be strong when I ran. She took me from being not very confident to giving me the strength that I needed.”

Honored as the 1996 Teacher of the Year by the Kent County Education Association and as a coach who achieved championships in basketball and track, Talus inspired inner strength in others — beginning in her childhood in Negaunee.

“She started with me when I was 6 years old,” attests kid sister Carrie Trehwella, 42, of Indiana. “Before going out to teach me how to ski, I can remember her getting out a chalkboard and showing me how to do it. She had the patience of a saint and was one of those coaches that you just wanted to please.”

Trehwella and seven classmates came under Talus’ track tutelage as middle-schoolers — and learned so well they set high school records at Negaunee High School that still stand as Upper Peninsula records.

“We were a dynasty, but she built it. She just related to children in a different way — she was soft spoken and she just made you want to please her.”

Gary Kemp, retired as Lowell High School principal, saw the makings of a great teacher when he hired her as a health education teacher and coach for a fledgling girls basketball program.

“It’s not the grades they bring to you on their transcripts, it’s more in how they relate to people.”

Kent, the Aquinas hurdler who’s in pre-med, thinks of Talus as she looks to the future:

“Since I was little, I’ve always wanted to find the cure to cancer, and it’s kind of ironic that Miss Talus fell into that part of my life, too. But, in my eyes, cancer made her even stronger.

“To think that she’d go in for treatments and then come to our

practices — sometimes in the cold and rain — showed how strong she was.

“I would love to someday be a coach. But I can’t imagine being half the coach she was to us.”

— Doug VanderLaan

Katharine Ann Talus

Sports, Fitness and Wellness



“I still use things that she taught me. ... She took me from being not very confident to giving me the strength that I needed.” — Natalie Kent



PRESS PHOTO/LANCE WYNN

Le Nguyen

Student Honoree

Wyoming Park High School art teacher Sherrie Davis knows a good artist when she sees one, but knows even better when there's a good woman behind the easel.

Le Nguyen, 17, is one of those, Davis says.

"Her artwork is sensitive, technically skilled and personally meaningful. She is willing to take a risk and create a deep level of conceptualization behind her artwork," she said. "Le is the type of student who sharpens a teacher's own thinking skills because of her sensitivity and thoughtfulness about the world around her."

Le is this year's YWCA Tribute

winner in the student category.

While this honor chains onto a list of honors Nguyen has racked up as an artist, she said she never did artwork for the awards. The 4.0-student, president and founder of the school's art club said it's just part of her nature.

"Art is more flexible in terms of what you do," Le said, instead of other classes that demand specific answers.

"It's really individual. Even though it doesn't look like someone else's work, it can still be good. This is more something I do for myself."

While she juggles roles as a chapter president of the National Honor Society and the National Art Honor Society, appears in

school musicals and plays saxophone in the jazz band, Davis said students naturally gravitate toward her for advice about their artwork.

One of Le's pieces was chosen as one of five to represent art at the state superintendent's office, another was one of five chosen in the Congressional Art Competition.

"Le has been able to weave together academic, artistic and personal achievements beyond that of any typical young woman," Davis said.

Le credits her parents, Tuan Nguyen and Thuy Phung, who were immigrants to the United States shortly before her birth, for her internal drive.

Asked to give advice to others entering high school, she said, "Don't feel foolish about anything you do. Don't hold back. The product will always be better. You'll feel better about it, and your chances for greatness improves."

She has applied to the University of Michigan and hopes to study architecture.

"It deals with art, but I'm really into math, so I wanted to use that, too," she said.

Not that she will pack away her beloved dry pastels when she sets foot on campus next fall.

"I hope to be able to do things on my own," she said. "You have to keep doing it to get better."

— Juanita Westaby

"Don't feel foolish about anything you do. Don't hold back. The product will always be better. You'll feel better about it, and your chances for greatness improves."