

# Tribute Awards

GRAND RAPIDS

## It's Tribute time for women making a difference

By Nancy Crawley  
For MLive.com

**W**omen who organize huge races every year, who pioneered flex time while cracking the glass ceiling, and who wrap protective arms around hundreds of neglected and abused children. These are among the winners of this year's Tribute Awards given by the YWCA of West Central Michigan.

In all, seven area women will be honored Wednesday at the YWCA's annual luncheon to highlight their achievements. Here is a look at these women and some of their accomplishments as cited in nomination letters and their own words about their work.



### SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS AWARD

**Kristen Aidif, 49**

Fifth Third River Bank Run race director

**Nominators said:** For the past 21 years, Aidif has served as race director for the largest 25K race in the country and is one of the longest-running directors in the state. In that time, the event has grown from a single event involving a few thousand people to a year-round, multi-event initiative involving close to 100,000 people.

She also launched the run's Charity Partners to raise more than \$1 million for local charities, Fitness In A Box to bring the message of health and wellness to businesses around the state and the Warrior Program that selects 10 people a year as community ambassadors for fitness.

Empowering women to move is a capstone of her career. Female participation in events has expanded to more than 55 percent of all participants.

She also has spearheaded programs such as Women Only running clinics and

mentoring programs.

Though working quietly behind the scenes for more than two decades, she is considered the "glue that keeps it all together."

**She said:** "The Fifth Third River Bank Run is a catalyst for so many people inspired to make positive changes in their lives, commemorate milestones, or raise awareness and funds for charities dear to their hearts. Standing at the starting line on the second Saturday of May each year and looking over the sea of people filling Monroe Avenue is a remarkable experience that inspires me — as well as the entire race committee — to work even harder the next year."

**Life lesson:** "As an event manager, I spend a lot of time thinking about next steps, Plan B and future improvements. My family and my faith, however, have taught me to spend more time appreciating the moment we're in, versus what may come next."



### COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

**Ora McConner Jones**

Retired Chicago Public Schools district superintendent and former director of the Branch County Community Foundation

**Nominators said:** Jones retired from the Chicago Public Schools 17 years ago and moved to Coldwater before relocating to Grand Rapids. Since her arrival, she has taken the community by storm by immersing herself in volunteerism and community service activities.

Her passion for education, literacy, health, the elderly, the underserved and social and racial justice led her to volunteer with the Grand Rapids Public Library Foundation, YWCA and Kent County Medical Society Alliance, where she was the first African American woman elected president of the alliance. She and her husband also founded a local chapter of the National Medical Society and Auxiliary, an historical black physicians organization with chapters across the U.S., but none in West Michigan.

She was a key player in the Rosa Parks Sculpture project that erected the sculpture of the civil rights pioneer at the downtown Rosa Parks Circle park. She was a member of the sculpture committee and co-chaired the Friend Raiser committee to stimulate fundraising in communities of color. Determined to help young people understand

"the significance of this ordinary black woman who is called the mother of the civil rights movement," Jones co-designed an annual essay contest about Parks' legacy in which more than 200 Kent County students compete for six cash prizes.

**She said:** "I was struck by the health disparities in infant mortality, cancer, cardiovascular diseases and diabetes between whites and blacks in Grand Rapids. I asked my physician husband how to make this issue known to the larger community. We agreed the first step would be to encourage the black physicians to be a voice in the community. Also, we knew that was the mission of the National Medical Society and Auxiliary. So, we reached out to those black physicians and their spouses to organize a local chapter that speaks out on how to close that health gap."

**Life lesson:** "The first step of a journey begins from wherever you are. The present time is what we have and, to reach our destination, we must begin now. Forget about the right time, right circumstances and right supporters. Dr. Benjamin Mays said, 'There is 60 seconds in a minute, but eternity is in it.'"

### IF YOU GO

#### YWCA TRIBUTE

**When:** Noon to 1:30 p.m. Wednesday  
**Where:** DeVos Place convention center  
**Tickets:** Reservations by noon Tuesday. Call 616-459-7062, ext. 218, or go to [ywcatribute2013.eventbrite.com](http://ywcatribute2013.eventbrite.com)



### ADVOCACY AWARD

**Sharon Loughridge, 58**

Executive director at D.A. Blodgett-St. John's home for children

**Nominators said:** During her 33-year career, Loughridge always has seen her role as being "a voice for the voiceless." She leads D.A. Blodgett-St. John's, the oldest child welfare agency in West Michigan, which serves about 2,000 children.

She recognizes navigating the child welfare system is often difficult and confusing and has positioned it as an expert agency with 22 programs for prevention, counseling, school support, foster care, emergency shelter and residential care.

She has taken the organization through a merger, a recession and its 125th anniversary celebration and has done all of this while overcoming two bouts with cancer. She first was diagnosed with breast cancer, fought it and later lost her mother to ovarian cancer. Then, she discovered she had fallopian cancer and, last January, had a preventative double mastectomy.

She was named the Kent County Social Worker of the Year in 1992, and her

program Minor Mother Program won the National Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties. From 1992 to 2004, she served on the Comstock Park Public Schools Board and was elected the first female chair for three terms.

**She said:** "My motivation comes from my belief children are vulnerable and have no voice in how society treats them. Every day, this work gives me a new opportunity to be a voice for them and advocate that they be given a fair chance in this world. These children are our future neighbors and community leaders. They deserve our best efforts at helping them grow into happy, healthy adults."

**Life lesson:** "Being a two-time cancer survivor has been a blessing in helping me to invest in what is important in life: my family, my faith and making the most of my opportunities to support others going through their own life struggles. Life is finite, we all have been given this one chance to do something meaningful."



### BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT, INDUSTRY AND LABOR AWARD

**Leslee Lewis, 41**

Practice department manager for real estate, environmental, energy and sustainability at Dickinson Wright PLLC and managing partner of the law firm's Grand Rapids office

**Nominators said:** Lewis was named the first female managing partner in the 135-year history of the international Dickinson Wright law firm. In that capacity, she serves on the firm's Governing Board, where she is a strong advocate for policies that empower women and minorities. In 1999, she was a trailblazer in instituting flex-time, paving the way for full-time male and female attorneys alike.

Also, she manages a practice department of more than 40 lawyers and coordinates 77 lawyers in real estate-related fields. She has a passion for renewable and sustainable energy, conservation and redevelopment. Some of her favorite projects include working on

Saugatuck Harbor Dunes preservation and development of the largest wind farm in Michigan.

She has provided pro bono legal services for many nonprofits. Perhaps nearest and dearest to her heart is her 17-year involvement with the Lake Michigan Academy for students with learning disabilities. The mother of two children, both with dyslexia and one with hearing loss and epilepsy, she has served on the board for 10 years, as board president 2009-2012 and is chairperson emeritus.

**She said:** "I have advocated for opportunities and flexible career paths for women (and men) and beta tested technologies aimed at providing attorneys work mobility for better life bal-



### ARTS AWARD

**Jenn Schaub, 34**

Neighborhood Revitalization associate, Dwelling Place

**Nominators said:** Schaub is an artist who seeks to use art to empower people, communities and the city. A few years after earning her bachelor's of fine arts at Grand Valley State University, she returned to GVSU to pursue her master's of public administration in nonprofit leadership. With Dwelling Place in the Grand Rapids' Heartside district, she coordinates the Avenue for the Arts, which includes Art Downtown, The Market, Free Radical and Urban Lights Holiday Market. Many of these programs would not exist without her leadership.

With her help, Dwelling Place has created and sustains more than 50 downtown live/work spaces for artists and arts-related businesses and groups. In that environment, private developers are investing in additional live/work spaces and arts developments in the area.

She has served on the boards of the Young Nonprofit Professional Network, Heartside Business Association and Neighborhood Association and Division Avenue Arts Cooperative. She also offers internships each year for students interested in blending



### PROFESSIONS AWARD

**Rochelle Manor, 48**

Neuropsychologist, co-owner of BRAINS (Behavioral Resources and Institute for Neuropsychological Services) and director of training for BRAINS Foundation.

**Nominators said:** Throughout her career, Manor has held leadership roles to advocate for and empower women, people with injuries and families affected by disabilities. In 1998, she was named the first female chair of the psychology department at Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services and later clinic manager of the Psychological Consultation Center. She held these leadership roles while also maintaining a full-time professional practice and mentoring other psychologists in improving clinical supervision skills.

Shifting to Hope Network Rehabilitation Services, she co-developed a group for young people with traumatic brain injuries and gave presentations to parents on "Raising Girls with Positive Self Esteem."

In 2007, she co-founded BRAINS to work with underserved and uninsured patients. She also is director of training for a consortium to train pre-doctoral students at BRAINS Foundation, Helen DeVos Children's Hospital psychology department and Ottawa Community Mental Health.

Manor won the 2012 Lipinski Award for Professionals from the Autism Society of Michigan for her commitment to autistic spectrum disorders. She has donated countless hours as an advocate for children

and their families at school planning meetings to optimize those students' learning potential. She works with Muskegon County to reduce recidivism rates for at-risk juveniles, developing programming in the family court and community mental health systems.

**She said:** "There are three generations with developmental disabilities in my family. So I grew up with an inside view of care taking and loving people with bodies and brains that didn't work the same as mine. My sister wasn't accurately diagnosed with autism until she was 28. So once I found the field of neuropsychology, I knew this was my life's work — to make sure families would have an accurate understanding and realistic strategies to function at their best."

**Life lesson:** "One of my favorite quotes, by Anais Nin, is 'Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.' I was a shy child but found myself getting involved in theater, band and church choir. The joy of joining others in performance made the fear manageable. This enabled me to tackle bigger fears — facing illness and multiple surgeries, being a single mom and starting a new business. Life continues to expand with adventure, joy and purpose. Courage is not the absence of fear, but the determination to pursue the most important tasks of life."

ance. I put my values into action: my practice group has more women leaders and more part-time or flex-time attorneys than any other in the firm, yet we have had record years despite challenges in the real estate economy. This year, a coalition of all female equity partners backed me in the Governing Board election, calling every voting partner in the firm. I owe the same courage and loyalty they demonstrated to all of our attorneys and staff."

**Life lesson:** "As a child, I was nurtured in salt-of-the-earth Michigan farming villages, along the beautiful shores of Northern Michigan, in college towns in Iowa and Tennessee, and in the elder care unit of a hospital, and I would never have thought those happenstances were meaningful. (God) wove those experiences into so many opportunities. It all boils down to this: God has a plan; His is better than mine."



### STUDENT AWARD

**India Dunning, 17**

Forest Hills Northern High School senior

**Nominator said:** India Dunning's volunteer work is wide ranging. Although she is too young to volunteer inside the hospital, she helps children from the Helen DeVos Children's Hospital hematology oncology department at its annual picnic and holiday events. She earned her Peer Leadership training certification to volunteer at Planned Parenthood, is an ambassador for the HIV/AIDS Teen Summit sponsored by Grand Valley State University and volunteers with Michigan Blood.

She carries a high grade-point average and serves on the National Honor Society board of directors that organizes community volunteer activities. She has earned her varsity letter and pin for cheerleading and crew.

Diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia in 2007, she called herself a cancer survivor after 2 1/2 years of treatment. Then, in March, she was diagnosed with mammary analogue secretory carcinoma of the salivary gland. She is nonetheless determined to pursue a career in pharmacy and has been selected to attend the University of North Carolina LEAD Pharmacy Program. She also has enrolled in the Kent Career Technical Center to complete her certification in pharmacy before college.

**She said:** "Being sick and not being able to do anything really motivated me. I thought it was only right to give back and volunteer for many different organizations."

**Life lesson:** "Whatever you're doing, keep a smile on your face. Staying positive ... will keep you motivated, and it can make someone else's day."