

Tribute Awards

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GRAND RAPIDS — Women who are a voice for the voiceless, who contribute to numerous prominent West Michigan projects and who volunteer their time and passion for the

betterment of others — these are among the winners of this year's Tribute Awards given by the YWCA of West Central Michigan.

Seven area women will be honored Nov. 9 at the YWCA's

annual luncheon to highlight their achievements. Here is a look at some of the accomplishments of these women, as cited in nomination letters and their own words about their work.

IF YOU GO

2016 YWCA TRIBUTE AWARDS

Annual awards luncheon to honor remarkable women sponsored by YWCA West Central Michigan.
 ■ When: Noon to 1:30 p.m. Nov. 9
 ■ Where: DeVos Place (ballrooms A and B), 303 Monroe Ave. NW
 ■ Tickets: Reservations by Friday; call 616-426-3716 or go to ywcatribute2016.eventbrite.com

ARTS AWARD

KIMBERLY VAN DRIEL, 29

Special events manager, Downtown Grand Rapids Inc.

Nominator said: Kim's journey to find her own path and voice has formed a broad view of the arts and its audiences and locations within our community. Her vision of the arts is expansive and is matched only by her

desire to transform the arts across age, race, culture and gender — recognizing that the arts feed the human soul, regardless of labels. She enhances our downtown, builds community and inspires others by expressing her passion for the arts.

She said: "I am continuously inspired by the people and the city that surrounds me. I am inspired every day by my colleagues, co-workers, committee members that I serve with,

DGRI board members and citizen DGRI Alliance members. Working with unique individuals on a daily basis is a consistent impact of creative inspiration. I am also fortunate enough to have a lot of creative minds that surround me in my personal life that contribute inspiration that is directly reflected in my career. There is inspiration everywhere you turn; you just have to be open-minded to say 'yes' and choose to go down the path."

Life lesson: "That there is no mold to fit in. There is no right or wrong way of doing something — it is just your way. Sometimes, it may take longer to get to your destination, but I strongly encourage everyone to make their own path and stick with it, even though it may not be the way they were told to do something. As they say, 'A smooth sea never made a skillful sailor.' Your impact will not go unrecognized, nor will your passion for what you do."



ADVOCACY AWARD

DR. NKECHY EKERE EZEH, 52

Associate professor, Aquinas College, and founder and CEO of Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative



Nominators said: Dr. Nkechy Ekere Ezech is a person who publicly, privately — and anywhere possible — passionately fights on behalf of vulnerable children and their families.

Ezech is a fearless community leader. She capably brings up the subjects that many are hesitant to address, especially issues of equity and disparity. She is a true champion of children and families, and promotes cultural competency in all aspects of her work.

She said: "It wasn't until I began working at REACH Inc. (Messiah Baptist Church) in 1990 that I realized that having a father who dared me to walk boldly and leave my own footprints and

a mother who raised me to be unapologetically my unique self was not a given for all children. Working in that environment, where I was daily in contact with the most vulnerable children and families in our community, I became inspired to spend my life fighting for them by creating an environment where vulnerable children and families are exposed to the necessary tools to ensure that they, too, have that same strong foundation."

Life lesson: "Be yourself! It may seem cliché, but I have learned to be my unique self. I grew up with my father's Nigerian tribal leader influence. He used to say to me, 'Chekem (one of his nicknames for me), remember who you are.' As a young girl, I never dreamed that one day I would be recognized as Dr. Nkechy Ekere Ezech, mother of five amazing children, Aquinas associate professor and founder/CEO of Early Learning Neighborhood Collaborative."

BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT, INDUSTRY AND LABOR AWARD

KERRI MILLER

Principal and senior vice president, Fishbeck, Thompson, Carr & Huber Inc.

Nominator said: Kerri is the first female principal in the firm's 60-year history and one of the youngest to ever be promoted. I know firsthand how hard it is to be a woman in leadership in a male-dominated profession. Kerri stands in the face of this adversity.

She empowers others to follow in her footsteps; she has taught me to be strong and how best to bring change to not only our firm, but also the industry itself. Women are underserved in this profession, but Kerri stands as a model to others. She speaks out at industry days and career fairs, engineering classes and high school rooms to tell her story and encourage girls to consider engineering as a profession. She is driving change and opening eyes to the possibilities for women all over this state.

She said: "My inspiration is the people

that I have been fortunate enough to work with throughout my career — co-workers, clients, sub-consultants, future engineers and others. I am surrounded every day by some of the most talented, intelligent people, and it allows me to continue to learn new things all the time. I knew from an early age that I wanted to be an engineer because I enjoy problem-solving and working on creative solutions, and I continue to remain engaged and interested because of the people around me. As a leader in the firm, I strive to make myself available to staff and cultivate an 'open door policy' for discussion, guidance and mentoring."

Life lesson: "I come from a family of four children, and my parents raised us to believe that we each had our own unique abilities and potential. I chose a profession that continues to be male-dominated and have worked very hard to reach a seat and have a voice at the leadership table. There have been struggles along the way, but I have never wanted to give up from realizing my potential."

COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

WENDY VERHAGE FALB, 51

Executive director, Literacy Center of West Michigan

Nominator said: Wendy has played — and continues to play — key roles in the growth and development of Grand Rapids. Wendy's personal vision, I believe, corresponds so well with the new mission statement of the Literacy Center she

helped create: "Bringing about a just and vibrant West Michigan through the power of literacy." Her own commitment to a just and vibrant West Michigan is what drove her to tutor, to strengthen our community and to encourage others to do the same.

She said: "My inspiration comes

from people's stories. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the complex barriers and challenges for making meaningful social change, but when you meet or get to know another person, a child or a family and hear their story, it moves you on a personal level. It's really exciting to be able to leverage connections, perspective, position, policy and funds to support the needs and aspirations of individuals. And getting to know them enlarges my world and my humanity."

Life lesson: "Do not underestimate your ability to affect meaningful change from wherever you are. All of us impact our world every day, for good or for ill. Do not underestimate the ripple effect of shifting your efforts and your spirit toward positive change and away from fear and cynicism."



PROFESSIONS AWARD

VICKI SEIDL, 56

Senior assistant Kent County prosecuting attorney/head of the juvenile division

Nominator said: Vicki is an outstanding leader. In her position as senior attorney in charge of the juvenile division, she supervises five attorneys, law clerks and support staff. She is the primary liaison between the family court judges and prosecutor's office.

Whenever Vicki is in a case, there is a sigh of relief that fairness and objectivity will prevail. She embodies integrity, hard work and problem-solving in a sensible way, which can be seen in her dedication. She's admired and respected not only by her colleagues, but by those who need her help."

She said: "I come from a large family with 12 children, where sometimes minor laws were broken, fights were had, things were broken and feelings hurt. My parents were firm believers that wrong actions required consequences to be imposed; thankfully, they also believed that forgiveness should follow. In my job, I have the opportunity every day to implement that philosophy I truly believe that juveniles should have consequences for

their wrong actions, but I also believe that we need to make sure that the consequences imposed do not ruin the child's future. Similarly, when I am dealing with neglectful parents, my primary goal is protecting the children in that family. In doing so, I must always remember that children love their parents and that no parent is perfect. Families should remain intact whenever possible, and parents deserve the chance to right the wrong they have done."

Life lesson: "I try to live my life keeping two quotes in mind. As a child, whenever I said, 'That's not fair,' my mother would always respond, 'Well no one ever said life was going to be fair, because what is fair to you is not necessarily fair to someone else.' The other quote (author unknown to me) is, 'You cannot fix a problem if you are consumed with fixing the blame.' While my mother was correct, I can at least try to be fair to everyone, even if, in the end, a true balance cannot be reached. When handling all the cases that arise every day in my job, things go a lot better when I am fair, respectful and working on a solution to the problem at hand, instead of arguing about how the problem started in the first place."

SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS AWARD

ADEJOKE AYoola, 46

Associate professor of nursing, Calvin College

Nominator said: Promoting women's health is Adejoke Ayoola's vocation — where her passion intersects with a real need in the world. She has committed 20 years to pursuing that passion. The past 10 years, Ayoola has demonstrated leadership in this area in Grand Rapids. What also needs to be noted is her posture of going about this work. She values others' stories. She values what others have to say about what she has become an expert in. She's not one to bring solutions, but to equip and empower women to find and own the solutions.

She said: "Women's reproductive health greatly impacts the health of the family and of the whole community. I saw many women with adverse pregnancy and birth outcomes while growing up in Nigeria. Many of the adverse

outcomes, which included maternal illness and death and infant and newborn deaths, were caused by preventable circumstances. So, early in life, I was curious to know how women and adolescent reproductive health can be improved. I am encouraged through my nursing education and training to use all available resources — namely nursing education, practice and research — to promote women's health and empower women to make informed decisions about their reproductive health."

Life lesson: "At times, our assumptions about women or underprivileged people are not accurate. Until one actually listens to a woman in distress, one may not know what intervention would be helpful to her in her situation. I found it very meaningful to listen to the women first in order to recognize their real challenges. In giving voice to their concerns, I am able to identify the real issues and find ways to involve others in resolving their concerns."



STUDENT HONOREE: YWCA JUDY LLOYD SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT

TAYLOR JONES, 17

Rockford High School student

Nominator said: Taylor is the youngest person ever hired on the Equest (Center for Therapeutic Riding) staff at the age of 14. We made this exception to our usual hiring practice because of Taylor's impressive maturity

level, focus, reliability and attention to detail. Whether leading children or adults, those able-bodied or with special needs, Taylor's natural leadership ability to motivate people to work together for a common goal shines through. Her quiet confidence and self-assured knowledge of who she is and what she can accomplish has inspired many young riders at Equest and beyond. Her impact in this regard espe-

cially is immeasurable. She inspires those around her and serves as a positive role model to those who have physical disabilities that anything is possible. She is a confident, highly motivated, giving young woman who consistently moves beyond barriers and accomplishes a true value and respect for all life.

She said: "My inspiration for volunteering at the Equest therapeutic riding

center stems from a lawn mower accident when I was 4 that led to the amputation of my right foot. Considering my knowledge of how to overcome difficult challenges with a disability, I decided I wanted to help people who have similar issues."

Life lesson: "One life lesson that I would like to share is even though an obstacle may be hard to overcome, reaching the end goal is always worth the hardships."

