

YWCA TRIBUTE AWARDS

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GRAND RAPIDS — Women who break down societal fences; initiate change; and advocate for domestic abuse survivors, Muslims, women of color and women in the workplace. 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 some of the accomplishments of these inspirational 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 by YWCA West Central Michigan

› When: Noon to 1.30 p.m. Nov. 8

› Where: DeVos Place (ballrooms A and B), 303 Monroe Ave NW in downtown Grand Rapids.

› Tickets: Reservations by Nov. 4 at 616-426-3716 or ywcatribute2017.eventbrite.com.

ADVOCACY AWARD

DR. VENESE CHANDLER

Executive director/CEO of Family Outreach Center

Organizations: Urban Core Collective, Mercy Health Community Benefits Ministry, Salvation Army Advisory Board and Social Services Committee, network180, The 501 Alliance.



Nominators said: Dr. Chandler is the first African American woman in her community to hold the position of executive director of a nonprofit organization. Dr. Chandler's advocacy in representing the underserved is evident within the services she led in developing Family Outreach Center, including many specifically focused on serving inner-city and underserved populations. Dr. Chandler has been a passionate mentor, not just for the staff at Family Outreach Center but also for other young professionals, especially those of color, in her community.

She said: "I am a woman of great faith and believe that there is power in prayer, positive thinking, and perseverance. This combination has seen me through some very tough times personally and professionally. Life can be hard, but I know that I'm built to overcome life's challenges in my pursuit of happiness and victory."

Life lesson: "I've learned that it's very important to be kind and supportive in all my interactions with others. This can be a challenge at times, especially when there are different values and/or opinions from my own. But I have learned to listen well, try and process what I am hearing or presented with, and always approach each situation or offer a response with grace and consideration for others."

BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT, INDUSTRY AND LABOR AWARD

DEBORAH PHILLIPS

Senior HR Business Partner at HR Collaborative LLC.

Organizations: Women's Resource Center, Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women, Michigan Women's Foundation.



Nominators said: Deborah is a leader among leaders. She uses her unique skill set to coach and mentor others to reach their full potential. ... Much of Deborah's current work focuses on helping women gain confidence and presence as they perform at an executive level in their organizations. She has also fought for the implementation of domestic partner benefits, a diversity supplier initiative and a culture where every voice is heard.

She is seen as a trusted advisor, coach and role model, and gives her time and talents freely. Through her compassionate and constructive counsel, she has changed the career trajectory for several women in West Michigan.

She said: "I never think the organization should stand still and I don't like change for change's sake, but I think I'd like to be change-adaptive all the time. ... I think if you can get people that excited for the possibilities that come with change or, what I always used to say, there's gifts that come with change and we need to seek or find those gifts."

Life lesson: "I learned this from so many smart people that I've had the privilege to work with. Particularly, there was a gentleman, who was an interim CEO in the early years of Priority Health, who reached out to me and said, 'Deborah, if you want to be good in HR you need to understand the business first because we're not in the business of HR. So, follow the dollar. Figure out how the company makes money and, then, how you impact it through people.' That is probably the sagest advice that I have ever received ..."

PROFESSIONS AWARD

VALERIE CARRASCO

Grand Rapids Police Department Detective

Organizations: Domestic Violence Coordinated Community Response Team, she also is involved in her church.



Nominators said: Det. Carrasco is a leader, maybe not in the title of her rank, but in her passion and informal leadership on and off the job. She is the rock that holds the domestic violence program together.

Since 2004, Det. Carrasco has investigated over 11,000 cases of domestic violence and over 4,000 have ended in arrest of a suspect. She has an extremely heavy caseload, but it can be argued she spends most of her time with victims.

She said: "Many victims I come in contact with don't necessarily have that community or family to fall back on, so I hope in some small way I can provide some support to them, both in the criminal justice system and just as a listening ear. I am fortunate to have incredible co-workers, working the same type of cases, with whom I am able to 'let off steam' with."

Life lesson: "1) Be present in the moment, both for yourself and others. 2) Instead of chasing happiness in life, try creating a life of purpose which is in line with your beliefs and values. 3) A smile and kind words can change your day as well as someone else's day! 4) A personal life lesson for me is the importance of faith in my daily life ... I think the above lessons also flow better when I am relying on God and my faith."

ARTS AWARD

EDYE EVANS HYDE

Ebony Road Players Executive Director

Organizations: Ebony Road Players, Grand Rapids Community Media Center board of directors, faculty at Hope College.



Nominators said: Edye Evans Hyde is one of West Michigan's premier female jazz musicians and theatre performers. She has performed in U.S. cities like Los Angeles and has performed in China and Europe. Edye has undergone brain surgery and a liver transplant. She has refused to let these personal health challenges stand in the way of her determination to create a more just and fair society for all people. ... Edye has touched thousands of lives both locally and across the world with her music, her theatre, and her quest for social justice."

She said: "My inspiration comes from so many places, but mainly from my friends and family who helped me heal both physically and mentally. I have a life bigger than my health issue. I did what I needed to do to get stronger. I will keep going until God says, 'It's time to rest.'"

Life lesson: "One important lesson I have learned is to not concentrate on perfection. One should find that 'thing' that makes you happy, take advantage of all the opportunities presented to you and find ways to make the community or world a better place. We should always encourage others to do the same."

SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS AWARD

SARA KNOESTER

President of Mixed Staffing & Recruiting

Organizations: Ottawa Hills High School volleyball, Living Stones Academy, Saint John's Home, Hope Network, GR8 Girls.



Nominators said: She sets high expectations and starts every year laying out the rules for her Ottawa Hills High School volleyball team: come to practice on time, dressed and ready to play; always respect yourself and your teammates; and grades and attendance in school always come first.

Sara's own experiences growing up with a father struggling with alcoholism provided a guide for helping those around her to never give up and build the skills they need to succeed in life.

For Sara, it is about sharing a sense of self-empowerment even when faced with challenges. She mentors her student athletes on and off the court.

She said: "I try to inspire them (volleyball players) through what I do, and not just talking the talk but walking the talk. So making sure anything I promise I fulfill. I try to do that with not just my volleyball players but with everybody I interact with. I try to follow through with my word and just inspire them to see the potential."

Life lesson: "I think one thing I've learned, and I was raised this way for sure by my mom was to always be grateful for what you have and always realize there's people who have it worse than you and always try to pay it forward to those people. And really just do good by others. I guess it's kind of a full-circle of if you do good by others, then good things will come to you."

COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD

JENNIFER DEAMUD

COO/Associate State Director of Michigan Small Business Development Center

Organizations: Grand Valley State University, Girl Scouts, Women's Resource Center, ATHENA Council, Byron Days Festival.



Nominators said: Jenn knows through individuals she is close to how much addiction, unimaginable abuse or family dysfunction can impact a life and a family. It is through this understanding that she has developed an immense passion for community and empathy for others. Jenn is a person who will help a stranger. She is a person whose definition of success is seeing those around her succeed.

She said: "I've had a significant amount of connection to addiction throughout my life. Whether it's a food, alcohol, drug or any other form of addiction, it destroys families and individuals if an individual is not able to establish a recovery program. People that I am very close to have been incarcerated for choices they've made. This does not make them any less of a person, it means they need support, encouragement and hope. There was a time in my life many years ago where I felt hopeless; it's no place for any person to spend time. This is one of the reasons I am so very passionate about supporting others."

Life lesson: "Show empathy. Having empathy makes a person stronger, not weaker. When we show empathy to colleagues and friends we can make a significant difference in their lives. Days are so consumed with getting the next thing checked off our list that we can forget to stop and look around to see those around us who need help, possibly a listening ear, a hug or other support."

STUDENT HONOREE AND YWCA JUDY LLOYD SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENT

BINTI ABDI, UNION HIGH SCHOOL SENIOR



Organizations: Board of Education, Union High School JROTC, National Honor Society, Grand Rapids Police Department, SkillsUSA.

Nominators said: Binti was once a small, angry child from East Africa who did not know a lick of English before coming to America. Now, she leads and motivates others through organizations and community roles.

In her early childhood, her family lived a nearly nomadic life, shuffling between Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania before finally immigrating to the United States. She had no clothes, no shoes, no house. At first she had trouble speaking about her traumatic past, but she gradually began to emerge from her self-imposed prison. She decided to be an overcomer and "make good out of bad experiences."

She purposely joined organizations and classes that would challenge and support her. She learned defensive techniques in her criminal justice classes and how to carry out emergency rescues and to overcome a fear of small spaces in the volunteer fire-fighting course.

She said: "My inspiration comes in many different shapes and sizes. I look at everything that happens to me as inspiration to keep pushing forward, but specifically my mother is a huge inspiration. I look at her and, sometimes, I feel she gave her life up for my family, but never have I heard her complain. She went to hell and back, from losing a mother to spending life in misery in Somalia. I love everything she has done for me and our family, and all I wish is for her true happiness. And the smile she gave me when I tell her about all my success makes me keep moving forward."

Life lesson: "I've learned very quickly that I can't please everyone. I am always a person who loved to make everyone happy and gave my trust to everyone but, in the end, I was the one who ended up getting hurt. For example, there was a time when I wore my hijab and it pleased my family and my Muslim community, but when I decided to do the military and other things, my hijab became a huge distraction. It came to the point where I had to stop wearing it and it hurt my family, but they didn't understand how much I was hurting with it on. I felt it was my fault and, for a long time, I was trapped in my own self-imprisonment because I felt I betrayed my religion, for loving to work out and do all these activities. But I learned I can't make others happy if I'm not happy with myself. I want people to really understand that you are in control of your life. Turn a negative into a positive and do what you love doing."