

# TRIBUTE!

2004 Awards Celebration  
Presented by the YWCA of Grand Rapids  
with Title Sponsor Fifth Third Bank

November 4, 2004

**ywca**

Grand Rapids

*The YWCA of Grand Rapids and  
Title Sponsor Fifth Third Bank present...*

# TRIBUTE!

2004 Awards Celebration

November 4, 2004

Noon - 1:30 p.m.

Ambassador Ballroom

Amway Grand Plaza Hotel

## WELCOME

Bridget White, Chairperson

*Board of Directors*

*YWCA of Grand Rapids*

Michelle VanDyke

President/CEO

*Fifth Third Bank*

Deb Bailey, Chairperson

*YWCA TRIBUTE! 2004 Steering Committee*

## INVOCATION

Anika Smith

Dan Richardson

## LUNCHEON

## AWARDS PRESENTATION

Bridget White

Deb Bailey

*Thank you for attending.*

## ADVOCACY



### MERCEDES TOOHEY

**Activist in the Hispanic Community & Human Resources  
Director, Clean-Tech LLC**

*Nominated by Congressman Vern Ehlers and Patricia  
Gardner*

According to her nominators, Mercedes Toohey's vision is simple: "to bring unity amongst Hispanics." Upon moving to Grand Rapids in 1979, Mercedes' activism began when she read in *The Grand Rapids Press* that the Hispanic community was under-represented among Census Office hires. Motivated to remedy this and the consequences it held for local Hispanics, she became the only local Hispanic administrator for the Census in 1980. She proceeded to recruit, test and hire a large number of qualified Hispanic candidates. Since then, she's become an outspoken leader for many Hispanic causes and was instrumental in starting the Hispanic Center of West Michigan, where she served as Board Chairperson for eight years, and Clinica Santa Maria, which serves low-income residents in the heart of Grand Rapids' Hispanic community. Her passion for fighting for her community has led her to be a sought-after authority to mayors, city commissioners, CEOs and political candidates like Congressman Vern Ehlers. She has served in numerous capacities for many organizations, including: Co-Chair of Teen Encounters with Christ, Youth Minister for the Catholic Diocese, United Way Task Force for Hispanic Teens, United Way CEO Selection Committee, Co-Chair for Steepletown Campaign Cabinet, Campaign Cabinet for American Cancer Society, Community Selection Committee for GRPS Superintendent, Co-Chair Grand Fiesta for Cesar Chavez Way and numerous boards and committees. While serving as a counselor at Grand Valley State University, Mercedes started the group "El Renacimiento," a new Hispanic student organization. For those who know her, Mercedes embodies the YWCA mission "to empower women, promote diversity and advocate for justice and equality." Her love of Grand Rapids is deeply rooted in the belief that the true beauty of our community comes from our willingness to appreciate multiculturalism.

## ARTS



### **SHARON MACK**

**Executive Director, St. Cecilia Music Society**

*Nominated by Scott Hubbard*

In the early 1990s, Sharon Mack gathered her strength to leave an abusive marriage with nothing more than her personal belongings, moved to Grand Rapids and began a new life. She contacted the YWCA soon after, which provided her the opportunity to feel she “belonged” somewhere. Her love of lifelong learning led her to Aquinas College, where she developed a passion for music, art and psychology while supporting herself with a series of sales jobs. Since then, she has dedicated her life to passion. Sharon joined St. Cecilia Music Society as a part-time receptionist just before the organization underwent a major reorganization and significant capital campaign. Sharon voluntarily stepped forward to handle media and took on important development and marketing projects as well. The Board was so impressed with her abilities that it offered the position of Interim Director to her when the Executive Director resigned. After five short months, Sharon was offered the position on a permanent basis. This rise happened in a period of less than two years and in that time, St. Cecilia has flourished. Her accomplishments include: doubling the annual giving campaign, revamping the organizational structure, beginning an endowment fund, establishing the Poltrock Piano Fund to raise money for a new Steinway concert grand piano and its maintenance, expansion of the youth orchestra and choir programs, partnering with YMCA to provide summer art experiences for underprivileged youth and introducing the Society’s KinderMusik program. Sharon’s passion extends beyond St. Cecilia, and she serves on the West Michigan Cultural Alliance, Downtown Alliance, Governor-Appointed Task Force on Creativity, Arts and Cultural Education, Opera Grand Rapids Education Advisory Committee, Bach Festival Committee and the Volunteer Management Association of West Michigan.



## **BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT, INDUSTRY AND LABOR**



**JUANITA BRIGGS**  
**President, Valor Industries**

*Nominated by Ileana McAlary*

Juanita Briggs knew from an early age that she wanted to be an entrepreneur. After earning her Associate's from Muskegon Community College, she joined Herman Miller's credit department. Her business acumen served her well and Juanita was promoted to Senior Product Manager, a position that allowed her to travel across the country identifying manufacturers with whom Herman Miller could partner. The experience further sharpened Juanita's skill and laid the foundation for her later entrepreneurial pursuits. Her professional successes were matched only by the inspirational commitment she exhibited in completing her education with Grand Valley State University over 12 years while also raising two teenagers as a single mom. When her position with Herman Miller was eliminated, Juanita, who believes that success of failure lies within an individual's control, set out on her own using the knowledge and experience she had gained over the years. She wrote her business plan, secured financing with a second mortgage on her home, and opened Valor Industries, which assembles and distributes office furniture. Within a month, Valor was shipping products to customers from a 45,000 square foot facility. Within six months, the company was posting \$10 million in sales. Valor Industries now boasts three sister companies as well. Juanita has participated in Leadership Grand Rapids, Michigan Minority Planning commission and received recognition from the Holland Chamber of Commerce and Ernst & Young. Juanita feels that giving your best extends beyond work, and she and her employees are active community members, participating in Adopt-A-Highway and Child Development Services' Adopt-A-Family. Juanita is truly a regional business leader with a personal mission of empowerment for herself and those whose lives she touches.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE



### MARY WILLIAMS

**Community Leader / Delta Sigma Theta Public Service Sorority and Vice President, Williams & Associates**

*Nominated by Deborah Clanton*

Mary Williams embodies the YWCA mission, having spent her life with organizations and programs that seek to empower women, promote diversity and advocate for justice and equality. As Vice President of Williams & Associates, a successful family-based marketing, advertising and promotions firm, Mary has been recruited to serve on numerous boards for organizations such as Hope Network, Grand Rapids Arts Council, YWCA, Metropolitan Hospital, United Way, Girl Scouts and Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women. Mary is frequently noted and admired for her significant and positive impact on the community. As the former president of Delta Sigma Theta (DST), a public service sorority, Mary led the organization to award over \$18,000 in scholarships to college-bound students and distributed 10,000 pounds of food to families in the core city. As a certified Red Cross HIV/AIDS educator, Mary travels throughout Grand Rapids and the surrounding areas, where she has helped educate more than 10,000 people. Combining her passion for the arts, history and education, she commissioned a writer to create a play "Legacy of African American Women/Black Women of the Harlem Renaissance" as part of the Grand Rapids Women's History Month, and she founded the Delta Center for Arts and Cultural Affairs, which has produced three plays to educate the public, celebrate diversity and expose children to African art, dance and music. Mary is a founding member and past president of WEAVING ETHNICITY, which strives to create awareness, heighten sensitivity and reach out to humanity about healing racism and cultural diversity. From voter education drives for the NAACP to high-profile fundraisers, Mary Williams truly lives her life as an inspirational role model, committed to strengthening our community.

## PROFESSIONS



### **PATRICIA GARDNER**

#### **Judge**

#### **17<sup>th</sup> Judicial Court, Family Division**

*Nominated by Mary Alice Williams*

Patricia Gardner knows the joys and sorrows of serving on the bench of the Kent County Probate Court-Family Division, where she's been a judge since 1987 and a fervent voice for the fair application of law in some of the most painful and complex situations facing our community's families. She has a profound belief that every child deserves a chance for happiness in the context of a stable, loving family -- a passion which began while at the University of Michigan Law School and has continued to influence her adult life. Patti has excelled as a leader in the Grand Rapids and State Bar Associations and as an active member of the Women Lawyers Association. Her commitment to our community is marked by her longtime involvement with the programs, festivals, services and Board of the Hispanic Center of West Michigan. She's helped shape the face of downtown Grand Rapids by serving on the Downtown Management Board and Monroe Mall Redesign Committee. She has served on numerous community boards, including United Way, Nokomis Grant-Making Advisory Committee and Life Guidance Center. Her commitment to all youth in our community has led her to develop two innovative programs: "The Late Show," through which volunteers read bedtime stories to young offenders incarcerated in the Juvenile Detention facility; and "Independent Living Closet", which provides household items to older children who cannot return to their families. Judge Gardner's court is the only one in the Family Division to have a kid's room where children can play and have a brief respite from courthouse proceedings. Shining the spotlight on the value of and need for adoptive homes in our community, "Adoption Day" is the happiest day in Patti's court, when annually, about 75 new families are created. This special day is just one example among many that highlights Patti's dedication and passion to the belief that healthy families are nothing less than the very fabric of our community.

## SPORTS, FITNESS AND WELLNESS



### KATHERINE ANN TALUS

*(June 9, 1956 - July 14, 2004)*

**Former Coach, Lowell High School Varsity Girls' Track**  
*Nominated by Laurie Kuna*

Kathy Talus was a pioneer. Hired at Lowell High School in 1979 to teach the school's new health curriculum, she also began coaching Varsity Girls' Track. Both were ground-breaking positions at the time. In the 25 years between her first day of teaching and her death from cancer this past summer, she paved the way for others with an innovative teaching style and an inspirational approach to coaching. Kathy was named Kent County Education Association Teacher of the Year in 1996 and as a coach, never had a losing season. She led the Red Arrows to track conference championships six times. She was the Varsity Girls' basketball coach from 1979-1986 and at the time she retired, was the only female girls' Varsity coach in the OK White Conference. At various times, she also coached boys' and girls' middle school basketball and cross country. Kathy built successful teams from a vision of what her athletes were capable of. She taught them the skills they needed and then gave them the confidence to succeed. She actively recruited students who were "given up on" by other coaches and coached all students as if they were future Olympians, regardless of their ability. Kathy formed the Lady Red Arrows, a varsity club for female letter-winners focused on mentoring young women in the Lowell district. She was an advisor for Lowell High School's SADD Chapter, the Ski Club, and participated in Race for the Cure just two days after undergoing chemotherapy herself. Kathy lived her life emulating the YWCA's mission, motivated to empower and advocate for young women with the knowledge that leaders lead by example.



## STUDENT



### LE NGUYEN

#### **Wyoming Park High School**

*Nominated by Sherrie Davis*

Le Nguyen is anything but a typical teenager. She is president and founder of the Wyoming Park High School Art Club, president of the National Honor Society, president of the National Art Honor Society, member of the Youth Library Board, the Student Council and the jazz band AND performs in school musicals. Always a hard working student, this year Le is taking three Advanced Placement courses and maintains a 4.0 average. According to her art teacher and nominator, her artwork is sensitive, technically skilled and personally meaningful, and she is highly respected by her peers because of it. Her creativity and love of learning strengthen her positive interactions with teachers and staff. Le is also a unique student who has had to overcome tough obstacles in her young life. Le grew up in a non-English speaking home, which means her experience has been anything but typical. Growing up in a home speaking a language foreign to most in this community, being a translator for people often twice her age, and living in a home with an elderly grandparent who often needs devoted care are all conditions that have created her character and integrity. Without animosity or resentment, Le has been able to weave together artistic, academic and personal achievements beyond that of many typical teenagers. In fact, she has used her personal circumstances as a point of understanding and empathy for others. Le Nguyen is an outstanding example of what a young woman can do through diligence, discipline and determination. She truly reflects not only the YWCA's mission but also the American dream.