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Clallam County Community Service Award winners honored for work on area's quality of life

By Rob Ollikainen
Peninsula Daily News

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PORT ANGELES — Six everyday heroes were honored for working behind the scenes to improve the quality of the life in Clallam County.

Volunteers Rita Berson, Cheryl Bowers, Angela Gooding, D. Mike Phillips and Dr. Gene and Norma Turner were recognized with Clallam County Community Service Awards on Thursday night.

"I'm sort of speechless, and that doesn't often happen, does it?" quipped Berson, Friends of Port Angeles Library bookstore manager.

The annual awards, begun by the Peninsula Daily News and now co-sponsored by Soroptimist International of Port Angeles-Noon Club, honor community volunteers "who have made a difference in Clallam County, who have made our communities a better place by doing extraordinary things for their neighbors, their community or the environment."

The recipients were chosen for their longevity of service, the number of people affected by their deeds, their time commitment and for making a "lasting contribution to the quality of the life in our community," said Cherie Kidd, Port Angeles deputy mayor, Soroptimist noon club member and Community Service Awards program chair.

"These everyday people have found ways to serve others and give back to their communities, often with very few resources and very little recognition along the way, because quite frankly, that's not why they do it," said Terry R. Ward, Sound Publishing west regional publisher and event facilitator.

"They do it to make a difference."

A crowd of about 100 filled the downstairs meeting room at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church for the 37th annual award ceremony.

Rita Berson

Berson received 16 nominations for her efforts to expand interest and revenue for creative programs at the Port Angeles Library.

Berson has volunteered at the bookstore since 2006 and became manager in 2009.

Kidd credited Berson for "10 years of bubbly joy dedication, passion and hard work."

"It's an honor to be recognized as a volunteer," Berson said between one-liners in a comical acceptance speech.

"I'm accepting this award, truly, as a team. I wouldn't be able to do one little bit of this without the team that we have. We have 30 volunteers."



Clallam County Community Service Award winners gather outside Holy Trinity Lutheran Church in Port Angeles before Thursday's award ceremony. The 2016 award winners were, front row from left, Cheryl Bowers with her service dog, Liberty, and Norma Turner, and back row from left, Angela Gooding, Gene Turner, Rita Berson and Michael Phillips. — Keith Thorpe/Peninsula Daily News

Cheryl Bowers

Bowers, president and founder of the nonprofit New Leash on Life, trains service dogs for veterans and others with disabilities.

She works actively in Voices for Veterans, helping to organize the three annual veterans stand downs.

"One of the things that she does is she empowers the disabled," said Clallam County Commissioner Bill Peach, who introduced Bowers.

"Service dogs allow that individual to get out in the community.

"Her service dogs give hope."

Three veterans accompanied by service dogs trained by Bowers were called to the stage and given a round of applause.

"The best thing about it is that one dog at a time, I'm changing lives," said Bowers, who introduced her own 2½-year-old service dog, Liberty.

Angela Gooding

Gooding returned to her hometown 1½ years ago. She founded the Port Angeles Citizen Action Network, (PA CAN) to address drug addiction.

Gooding also teaches language arts and state history at Stevens Middle School.

“Angie is a middle school teacher, first of all, and that alone, for me, is enough to be award-worthy,” said Leslie Robertson, founder of Revitalize Port Angeles and Gooding’s presenter.

“When she came back, she saw some of the struggles that Port Angeles was dealing with, primarily with addiction, and she decided to do something about it,” Robertson said.

PA CAN has successfully lobbied for drug intervention specialists in Port Angeles schools and a substance abuse initiative in the Port Angeles Police Department.

It also has promoted sober housing for recovering addicts and a candlelight vigil for drug overdose victims, among other accomplishments.

“I’m looking at a sea of faces that half of you helped raise me,” Gooding said.

“And so I want to thank all of you for the support that you gave me growing up as a young child and again now that I’m

back as an adult.”

She added: “I’m very humbled and grateful for being acknowledged like this, and I cannot wait to continue accomplishing things with all of you.”

D. Mike Phillips

Phillips’ long list of community service began when he joined the Port Angeles Rotary Club some 50 years ago.

In 1967, he began working with United Good Neighbors, which preceded United Way of Clallam County.

Phillips was a charter member and second president of the Nor’Wester Rotary. He served on the YMCA board in the 1970s and joined Sunrise Rotary in 2000.

“It’s been great to be in this community,” Phillips said.

A former Army cook, Phillips has been the head chef at his churches and still delivers meals on wheels.

“His cooking skills were cultivated during the Vietnam era,” said Nick Rotello, who drove from Longview to introduce his longtime friend.

“As a cook, he served thousands of troops. Tonight, though, I’d like to focus on the man.”

Rotello told a heartfelt story about how Phillips helped him through a divorce.

“As a husband and as a father, his heart is pure,” Rotello said.

Gene and Norma Turner

Dr. Gene and Norma Turner also were recognized for decades of service to Clallam County.

Norma Turner was elected to five of the six county Charter Review Commissions and served as chair last year.

She founded Prevention Works!, is active with the League of Women Voters, has served for a decade on the board of the Peninsula Housing Authority and co-chairs the Boys & Girls Clubs of the Olympic Peninsula Port Angeles Unit Advisory Board.

Dr. Mary Wegmann, who met Norma Turner in 1973, described her “political” friend as a cross between the Energizer Bunny and a sheepdog that “helps to guide people towards a goal.”

“She’s persistent in moving us,” Wegmann said.

Norma Turner said she stays active to avoid housework and to keep her mind sharp.

Gene Turner, a retired doctor who opened the North Olympic Peninsula’s first pediatric clinic, still volunteers at Volunteers in Medicine of the Olympics, the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center and the Peninsula Tennis Club.

An avid gardener, he donates produce to the Salvation Army and other organizations.

“Gene had a very loyal following amongst his patients in the clinic and the community,” Dr. John Wegmann said.

“He took on a lot of the really sick kids and was a very important person in the lives of many families in Port Angeles.”

Both Turners volunteer with Habitat for Humanity of Clallam County, with Boys & Girls Clubs of the Olympic Peninsula, in public schools and in medical mission work outside of the country.

“For 30 years, this community gave to us with the education of our four children, who are spread all over the world now,” Gene Turner said.

“And now, after retiring, we are having a lot of fun trying to give to the community.”

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