

We are the Champions

Compassion Foundation honors remarkably giving residents

April 12, 2010

By **MARISSA AMONI** For Sun-Times Media

Big hearts filled the room at Long Island Sound in Aurora for the Compassion Foundation's Community Champion awards on Wednesday night. The first-time event celebrated community members who make a difference in the lives of many.

"We really wanted to highlight their great works," said Mary Griffith, executive director of the Compassion Foundation. "We wanted to make sure that their story is told this year."

The foundation feted 12 nominees at the dinner, including Tricia Fragan, Phil Prior, Marilyn Weisner, Molly Fitzpatrick, Robert Thurlby, Karen Christensen, Hilary Brennan, Linda Healy and Dr. Jorge Partida. Ron and Maureen Wehri, Dr. Robert Larson and Jerry Rich were absent.

» [Click to enlarge image](#)



Brennan

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Prior

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Hogan Weisner

» [Click to enlarge image](#)



Fitzpatrick

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Fragan

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Christensen

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Thurlby

THE NOMINEES

Champions can be hard to define but each displays something special -- courage, dedication, concern and conviction, according to the Compassion Foundation. The nominees for the 2010 Compassion Foundation Community Champions Awards were named at the Community Champions event Wednesday at Long Island Sound Banquets. The foundation says they all make our community a better place to live and work.

The 2010 nominees are as follows. Reasons behind their nominations are according to the foundation.

Ron and Maureen Wehrli

Ron and Maureen have been champions to many children from single-parent families through the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Kane and Kendall Counties. They have opened their hearts and their home to fishing derbies, shopping trips and more for children who need a mentor, reside in very low-income families, and/or face multiple stressors in everyday life.

Patricia "Tricia" Fragan

Patricia is a champion to many families facing their child's critical illness. After the death of her daughter, Melissa, to cancer at age 17, Tricia founded "Normal Moments." Normal Moments is devoted to supporting parents of critically ill children in the home, the hospital and via Web resources so they can spend as much time as possible sharing the most normal moments possible with their children. Volunteers, or "Davids," named for one of Tricia's friends who was there for her, help provide this vital service.

Phil Prior

Phil is a champion to people working to maintain independence in the community. In addition to his duties in the Intensive Outpatient Program at Gateway Foundation, Phil spends many weekends working with people living with mental illness, helping them reintegrate into the community and their own apartments after living in nursing homes. Phil will be getting his master's degree this spring.

Marilyn Hogan Weisner

Marilyn is a champion to families needing emergency food. She works diligently to meet the needs of a growing population of the hungry through the services of the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry. Additionally, she has served in the Peace Corps, established the Rainbow Center, Illinois Early Intervention Coalition and is a staunch advocate for children with special needs. Marilyn works tirelessly for the benefit of the citizens of Aurora.

Molly Fitzpatrick

Molly is a champion to seniors and people with disabilities who need home repairs. Molly is an Americorp volunteer serving at Rebuilding Together Aurora. In addition to assisting with the mission of RTA locally, Molly has traveled twice in the past six months to help rehab homes damaged by Hurricanes Katrina, Ike, Gustav and Rita.

Robert Thurlby

Bob is a Champion to people facing homelessness by providing meals, mentoring and work training in the trades. Through his organization "My Fathers Hands," Bob has worked with numerous individuals giving them the skills needed to continue on into gainful employment and a chance at a better future.

Karen Christensen

Karen is a champion to the people of the city of Aurora. Working for the city, Karen is responsible for the management and oversight of the Neighborhood Redevelopment Division of the Community Services and Outreach Department. Its mission is to support the stabilization and revitalization of Aurora's neighborhoods.

Hilary Brennan Hilary is a champion to people and organizations in need. Hilary has been a director of the Community Foundation for a number of years; is a board member for Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry; and has been on several boards in the area including Aurora University, Fox Valley United Way, Provena Mercy Medical Center and YWCA Aurora.

Linda Healy Linda is a champion to all victims of domestic violence. A powerful advocate for every survivor, Linda is a compassionate leader who works diligently to fight to end the cycle of violence and its detrimental effects on families, children and communities through the many innovative services provided at Mutual Ground. Linda has been instrumental in helping Mutual Ground grow and prosper through very difficult economic times.

Dr. Jorge Partida Jorge is a champion to the families served by the programs and services of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Jorge has been instrumental in helping the MSC through an English as a second language class at St. Therese Church in Aurora. He has worked with the MSC on strategic planning and development to ensure program success. He has also worked extensively with Latino and African-American youth and families who face multiple stressors.

Dr. Robert Larson

Robert is a Champion to many people in his community. He serves and has served on multiple boards. Currently, he devotes his time to the George Buck Werden Boys and Girls Club of Joliet and the Plainfield Lions Club. In the past, he was a board member of St. Francis College in Joliet and the Crisis Line of Will County.

Jerry Rich

Jerry is a champion to children and adults who love golf. With Hook a Kid on Golf, Jerry believes all children will learn valuable life skills through the game of golf while eliminating the obstacles that may keep a child from being able to participate. In its 11th year, Hook a Kid on Golf reaches out to kids regardless of the ability to pay. The program runs nationwide. Jerry also opens his indoor golf arena to the NIU golf teams for practice during the colder weather. Jerry is also a staunch supporter of his church and many local nonprofit organizations through Rich Harvest Farms.

Tim Brennan, president of the Compassion Foundation, welcomed the large group of community leaders and volunteers. "Today we are celebrating enthusiasm, commitment and sheer hard work," he said.

Robert Renteria, author of "From the Barrio to the Board Room," was the evening's keynote speaker. He spoke about what makes a champion. Courage, dedication, concern and character are some of the traits that it takes, he said.

"If you believe, you can be anybody you want to be," Renteria said. He went on to say that we are all one race -- the human race. He praised the many champions in the crowd and said, "As long as we have heart, we always have a chance."

Then foundation board member Dr. Gary Ahasic presented the Community Champion awards to Ron and Maureen Wehrli for their work with children from the Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Kane and Kendall Counties program; Phil Prior from the Gateway Foundation for his work with reintegrating people with mental illness into their own homes; Molly Fitzpatrick of Rebuilding Together Aurora for her work in helping seniors

and people with disabilities have safe housing; and Tricia Fragan of Normal Moments for her work with families whose children are facing serious illness.

Clyde Shields, director of Big Brothers Big Sisters of Southern Kane and Kendall Counties, accepted for the Wehrlis.

Fragan brought up David Orlicz to accept the award with her. Fragan founded Normal Moments with her daughter, Melissa, who died of cancer at age 17. Orlicz assisted the family by taking care of daily chores so they could experience "normal moments" with Melissa. Normal Moments volunteers are called "Davids," after Orlicz.

Marilyn Weisner won the Fr. Muller Community Service Award for her contributions to people with disabilities as well as her work at the Aurora Area Interfaith Food Pantry.

The Champion of the Year Award went to Jerry Rich of Rich Harvest Farms for the work he does with low-income children and students from Northern Illinois University through his golf programs and foundation.

"All the nominees were very deserving and are champions, in our opinion, for the work they do making Aurora and our communities a better place," Griffith said.

The Compassion Foundation is a volunteer-led humanitarian service organization. The foundation assists individuals and organizations that serve those in need. For more information, call 630-892-2371 or visit www.compassionfoundation.org.