

YWCA celebrate local women who strive to make a difference during the Annual Women of Distinction Dinner

by Steven Spencer, Staff Writer
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ALTON - The YWCA held their 28th Annual Women of Distinction Dinner last Thursday evening celebrating women in who strive to make their community a better place to live.

Since 1991 the YWCA of Alton has presented more than 260 local women with the Women of Distinction Award and this year honored Dr. Alicia Alexander, Mary Buckley, Patricia J. Devening, Stephanie Elliot, Shirley Emons, Sara McGibany, Cora Miller, Lisa A. Nielsen, Honorable Sarah D. Smith and Angel Weber.

Dr. Alexander, a professor at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, has been spreading the message that properly fitting bras and underwear, and menstrual hygiene supplies are necessities, not luxuries. Alexander is the organizer of the local Support the Girls programs in Edwardsville and at SIUE. Over the last two years, she has helped to donate over 4,400 bras, 1,200 pairs of underwear and 40,000 feminine hygiene products to women in need throughout the area.

Buckley, a local educator, has been passing on her belief that children should be able to lead a productive life and have an impact on their community. By teaching the importance of self-worth and having a purpose in life, Buckley strives to create active participants in the community and never let their race or gender define them.

Devening has a mission of helping young women overcome the fear of math. As a banker at TheBANK Edwardsville, Devening has shown the importance of financial literacy by bringing education programs into local schools and teaching students how to balance a checkbook, obtain credit and how to prepare and live within a budget.

Elliot has spent most of her adult life volunteering to help at-risk young women in the community. Through “Stephanie’s Place,” which was once just a vacant lot, Elliot is able to provide low-income families with Christmas and Easter parties, fire safety events with the Alton Fire Department, free bicycle giveaways and public safety events with the Alton Police Department.

Emons has been volunteering in the Riverbend for 70 years with organizations such as the YWCA and the Godfrey Women’s Club. “Shirley’s Kids,” was started once Emons found her passion for the Riverbend Head Start program. Last year \$28,000 was raised for the Head Start services.

McGibany, Executive Director of Alton Main Street, is a tireless advocate for the entire Alton community, creating multiple activities and events that enhance the lives of all residents in the area. She helped organize Grassroots Grocery to create more access to fresh produce in an area that has been designated a food desert in Alton.

Miller learned the value of volunteering while volunteering for Easter Seals. Miller is dedicated to enhancing the lives of women and children in the Riverbend area through organizations such as Zonta Club of Alton-Wood River, which focuses on helping women and children by donating winter clothes and school supplies throughout the area.

Nielsen, former President and member of the Junior League of Greater Alton, has dedicated herself to improving the community by helping with events such as the Riverbend Head Start Circle of Caring fundraiser to help support families with child care, education and social services.

Smith, an Associate Judge in Madison County, frequently volunteers with the Alton Boys and Girls Club mentoring young underprivileged girls, focusing on topics of self-esteem, the consequences of “sexting” and cyberbullying and the importance of being committed to achieving your personal goals.

Weber, a teacher at Alton Middle School, takes her interaction with students as an art teacher very serious as she’s herself being responsible for opens their imaginations. By using art to help educate student’s during black history month and women’s history month, Weber has dedicated herself creating conversations and the opportunities to discuss and explore racism and equal rights throughout the community.

For more information on the YWCA of Alton visit www.altonywca.com.