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Human Service Coalition set to recognize three

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By Eric Banford

Tompkins Weekly

The Human Services Coalition of Tompkins County is preparing to honor three women who have devoted their lives to the enhancement of health and human services in the county.

The awards will be presented at the HSC's annual luncheon, scheduled for noon to 2 p.m. Thursday, February 16.

Each year, HSC puts out a call for the community to nominate candidates who they feel are deserving of the various awards. A committee then reads through the nominations and has the difficult task of choosing winners from the many worthy entries.

"It's always hard to pick the winners," said Kathleen Schlather, executive director of the HSC. "It's really humbling to read what people have done and how much effort they've put in to both their professional and their volunteer lives.

"And it's great to give out these awards because the organizations and the people don't do this for awards, they do it because they're really dedicated professionals and volunteers," she added. "It's unfortunate that we can only give away one award in each category."

The longest running of the honors is the Ruth Pettengill Award, which is in its 33rd year, and is intended to honor a truly unique individual for their outstanding contributions to the local community as a health and human services professional.

This year's recipient is Cristine Donovan, director of Early Childhood and Community Services at Franziska Racker Centers. According to information provided by the HSC, she has demonstrated great leadership and growth, and has made many significant contributions to improving the quality of services and assisting developmentally disabled residents of Tompkins County. Her assistance has been widely sought throughout the Tompkins County community to assist when a family's needs did not fit into existing service models. She has always had a tireless approach and commitment to supporting individuals and families, always willing and ready to talk and meet with them to help solve problems and meet their needs in a non-assuming way and with a humble approach.

The 23rd annual Anne T. Jones Award for a Dedicated Volunteer will be given to Carrie Kerr, who has gone far above and beyond the typical notion of volunteerism in terms of strength of leadership, depth of commitment and scope of impact on the community. According to information provided by the HSC, having retired from teaching special education in the Ithaca City School District, she decided to do something to solve one of the many problems that had been talked about for many years: transportation barriers to student success, family engagement, and educational equity. She did not answer an organization's call for volunteer help; she stepped up to help tackle a persistent community inequity with no easy solution.

Kerr enrolled professional collaborators within the Department of Social Services, the Ithaca-Tompkins Transportation Council, Way2Go at Cooperative Extension, TCAT, Ithaca Dispatch and the Ithaca City School District, as well as volunteers from the Ithaca Public Education Initiative and others in the community. The group became known as the School Success Transportation Coalition.

Through Kerr's leadership, a collective effort emerged that, over time, has all but eliminated transportation barriers to student participation in pre-and after-school activities, and family attendance at school meetings and events.

The newest of HSC's annual awards is the Cecelia Montaner-Vargas Spirit of Inclusion Award, which is given to an agency, group, or individual for their efforts to

build diversity or inclusion in the local health and human services community in ways that are original, sustainable, can be replicated by others, and/or that can be shown to have had measurable effect.

This year's honoree is the Sciencenter, which has made inclusion and diversity a top priority of the museum. While many similar museums throughout the U.S. have focused primarily on science programming and financial stability, the Sciencenter has made inclusivity front-and-center.

In the past decade, according to information provided by the HSC, the Sciencenter developed a series of initiatives to make the educational opportunities of the museum available to every child in Tompkins and surrounding counties, including free community events, a free after-school program at GIAC, scholarships for a summer sciences camp, free educational field trips available to 2nd grade school children in the region, and many programs to make the museum's programs accessible to all.

Schlather noted how emotional the award ceremony can be.

"The people who work in these fields are usually very humble and are very moved by the fact that they've been given an award," she said. "The award really comes as a big thank you from a crowd of human service professionals that come to the ceremony, and I think that means a tremendous amount to people.

"We also really appreciate the people who take the time to makes these nominations," Schlather added. "They really make an effort to send in interesting nominations that reflect the nominee's history of service."

Nominations for each year's awards are sought beginning in December, but nominations can be written up any time of the year.

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For more information about the awards luncheon, contact Human Service Coalition at (607) 273-8686.

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