

Town-Gown Awards: Honoring People Who Feed the Hungry

By Bill Chaisson editor@ithacatimes.com | Posted: Wednesday, December 10, 2014 11:30 am

Cornell held its annual Town/Gown or “ToGo” award ceremony in the Kulp Auditorium at Ithaca High School on Dec. 6, a rainy Saturday morning. The awards recognize collaborations between university staff, faculty, and students and not-for-profit organizations in Ithaca that have made significant contributions to the general welfare of the community. Both organizations and individuals are recognized, with the latter generally being appreciated for many years of service.

This year ToGos went to St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, Kids Discover the Trail, the Cayuga Lake Monitoring Group, and Rev, the downtown business incubator.

The large network of food pantries and food distributors in Tompkins County and beyond received special attention this year. Individuals also received awards: Terry Byrnes, Audrey Cooper, Jean McPheeters, Mimi Melegrito, Nancy Potter, and Aurora Valenti.

Gary Stewart, Cornell’s Director of Community Relations, opened the ceremony, noting that it was good to have this sort of gathering as a respite from recent tragedies like the Thanksgiving murder of a Cornell undergraduate in Cayuga Heights. Stewart read a list of community leaders who passed away in 2014: Molly Adams, who founded a preschool in Brooktondale; Doug Austic, longtime supervisor of the Town of Ulysses; Ray Buckley, former superintendent of Lansing schools; Dennis Mastro, former chair of the Ithaca/Tompkins Chamber of Commerce; Teresa Robinson of Groton, the first female town supervisor in the county; and Stu Stein, Cornell planning professor and county legislator.

St. Luke’s Lutheran Church, located on the edge of campus in Collegetown, was recognized for its “Bair Walk” during which volunteers knock on Collegetown doors and distribute resources with the aim of building community. Rev. Rick Bair accepted the awards, along with volunteers Judy Tennant and Julie Paige, saying, “We’re not here to convert, but to converge.”

The Cayuga Lake Monitoring partnership began as a monitoring project with the New York State Department of Environmental Management because of concern over phosphorus pollution, but has broadened into an ongoing collaboration among the city, county, and the university to keep an eye on



At the ToGo Awards

Representative of 10 different food distribution organizations received ToGo awards last Saturday.

the health of Cayuga Lake. Roxy Johnston of the Ithaca Water Treatment Plant, Frank Proto of the Water Resources Council, and Bert Bland, a senior director of Cornell Facilities Services came forward to receive awards. Johnston called the group a “useful conduit for the exchange of information.”

Kids Discover the Trail (KDT) was started by the Ithaca Public Education Initiative (IPEI) to bring public school children to the Discovery Trail sites free of charge. Receiving awards were Mary Grainger of IPEI, Charlie Trautmann of the Sciencenter, Sonja Skelly of Cornell Plantations, Mary Winston of the Laboratory of Ornithology and Carol Hockett of the Johnson Museum of Art. Trautmann said he had looked around the country for an analogous effort and had not been able to find one. KDT is responsible for 25,000 free trips for school children.

Chris Travis of Travis/Hyde Properties, Carl Haynes, President of Tompkins-Cortland Community College (TC3), and Tom Schryver, Cornell Executive Director for Regional Economic Advancement accepted ToGo awards for Rev, the business incubator, a joint project of Cornell, Ithaca College, and TC3.

But it was the representatives of the regional food distribution organizations that got a standing ovation on Saturday morning. Presenter Joel Malina, the Vice President of Community Relations at Cornell, noted that a rising number of local households that report not having enough food and that “it is difficult to think of a more important job than providing people with food.” Food Bank of the Southern Tier, the Friendship Donations Network, the Tompkins County Food Distribution Network, Loaves and Fishes, and Foodnet received recognition. Also cited were Cornell Dining, the Cornell University Vegetable Research Farm and the Cornell chapter of the Food Recovery Network.

“It’s appropriate that you see so many people here,” said Christina Culver, Executive Director of Loaves & Fishes, “because it really is a network with a lot going on behind the scenes.”

Before individuals received their ToGos, the assembly paused to say goodbye to departing Cornell President David Skorton. Luvelle Brown, superintendent of Ithaca schools, Jean McPheeters, recently retired head of the Ithaca-Tompkins County Chamber of Commerce, and Marcia Fort, director of GIAC toasted the president, who will leave at the end of the academic year.

Brown recalled that Skorton invited him up to campus within days of his arrival. He admitted that he didn’t remember a thing the Cornell president said to him that day, but he recalled that when he left he felt good. McPheeters said baldly, “Cornell is our economy, and they have to run it like a business.” She thanked Skorton, who is a physician, for instituting a program that brought doctors to the Ithaca area—for which it is difficult to find recruits—by allowing them to also practice at Cornell Weill Medical Center in New York City. Fort complimented Skorton for staying engaged with the community of color for the entire eight years he lived and worked in Ithaca.

Former Ithaca mayor and now Cornell Director of Community Relations John Gutenberger

presented ToGo statuettes to Terry Byrnes, a founder of IPEI; Audrey Cooper of the Multi-cultural Resource Center for 41 years of public service; Mimi Melegrito, first woman president of Ithaca Kiwanis and a “match specialist” at Big Brothers, Big Sisters; Jean McPheeters for being able to “built on commonality to create a solution that no one is entirely happy with, but everyone accepts”; Nancy Potter for 30 years of service at Cornell Cooperative Extension; and Aurora Valenti, the retiring County Clerk for being at the forefront of digitizing government records.