

Honoring High-Achieving Women By Victoria Hurley-Schubert - 9/11/2006

WEST LONG BRANCH - The Central Jersey Chapter of the National Association of Women Business Owners (NAWBO) will honor nine women and one man with Platinum Star awards this week.

The annual awards honor extraordinary contributions to women in business, says Donna Domenicali, NAWBO chapter president. "For example, [Rutgers] Coach [C. Vivian] Stringer is marvelous at harnessing women for teamwork. We're recognizing people we feel have stood out over the year or over a period of time helping women business owners," she says.

Two awards, Emerging Business and Women in Sports, are being handed out for the first time this year. The nine winners were chosen by the NAWBO board from among the chapter's membership and NAWBO business connections.

The winners to be honored Tuesday at Branches in West Long Branch are:

- **Business Owner of the Year**—Barbara Davis, founder and owner of Barbara Davis Employment Services. Davis got her start 19 years ago after rising through the ranks of placement director and regional director of the Catherine Gibbs School, where she helped graduates prepare for job interviews.

Davis decided to start her own agency in Red Bank to be closer to her family. Her temporary help agency focuses on positions ranging from human resources personnel to computer programming, and places candidates in Monmouth, Middlesex and Mercer counties.

"Year after year we place about 500 employees on direct hire and temp-to-hire," says Davis. "Going through two recessions, I've overcome challenges." Her business is flourishing and year-to-date revenue is running 17% ahead of last year, she says.

Davis serves on boards at Brookdale Community College, the Stuart School of Business and the United Way of Monmouth County, among other groups. For the past six years, she has donated part of her revenue to nonprofit community organizations in Monmouth County.

Davis was introduced to NAWBO by a girlfriend when she started her business in 1988, and has been deeply involved ever since. "Every business owner is a dreamer. Following your dreams will lead to success," she says on her Website, www.barbaradavis.com.

- **Emerging Businesswoman of the Year**—**Marcia Blackwell, owner of Blackwell's Organic in Red Bank.** The award goes to a businesswoman whose company is less than three years old and has demonstrated rapid growth and strong potential.

Blackwell, whose business makes organic sorbets and gelato sold in New Jersey and eight other states, launched her company after being laid off from her job as an office manager for a telecommunications company in 2005. She entered the frozen confection market because her lactose-intolerant husband disliked the products available at the time. She used recipes her husband Tom whipped up to create a dozen flavors.

Blackwell started the business with an \$80,000 home-equity loan. "We knew we'd get a better rate [than an SBA loan]; the rates were really low at that time," she says. She used the loan to rent production space and had the frozen desserts on store shelves in January. The most popular flavor is chocolate gelato. "We're certainly not profitable yet..." says Blackwell.

- **Women's Empowerment:** Nell Merlino, founder and president of Count Me In for Women's Economic Independence, based in New York City. Merlino's company provides online microloans from \$500 to \$10,000, and resources to provide women the tools to grow their small businesses into million-dollar enterprises. Last year her company partnered with OPEN, an American Express small-business unit, to launch a program called "Make Mine a \$Million Business" to provide money, mentoring and marketing opportunities for women.

The program's goal is to "foster a community of one million female-owned businesses at \$1 million or more in annual revenue by 2010," according to Count Me In's Website, www.count-me-in.org. Last year's pilot program helped 23 women entrepreneurs get their businesses started or growing.

Merlino, a labor-relations expert and a former manager in the New Jersey Department of Human Services, in 1993 created "Take Our Daughters to Work Day" for the Ms. Foundation for Women.

Other award winners:

- **Women's Sports**—C. Vivian Stringer, head coach of the women's basketball team at Rutgers University and the first coach to take three different schools to the Final Four in NCAA tournaments. Stringer led the Lady Knights to the Elite Eight round last year. The first-time award goes to a woman who has made substantial contributions to helping women advance in sports.
- **Women's Health**—Rosemarie Poverman, a licensed clinical social worker who uses humor to teach life skills. Her theme: "Living, loving and learning through laughter."
- **Community Service**—Dawn Nakash, a fundraising developer and event planner who serves on many local boards and charities.
- **Member of the Year:** Elizabeth Milio, owner of Computer Services in Freehold. She was cited as a role model for other women-business owners and a supporter of NAWBO.
- **Rookie of the Year**, given to a new member who "jumped in feet first and became a visible, enthusiastic supporter" —Jeanie Coomber, executive director and co-founder of Transition Enterprises, a career development firm in Spring Lake.
- **Distinguished Advocate Award**—U.S. Rep. Rush Holt (D-12), for promoting Einstein's Alley as a high-tech district along the Route 1 corridor, and for advocating on behalf of women in business and domestic-violence prevention initiatives.

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