

NEWS

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WORCESTER — It was a time to remember the past as well as honor women in the present as more than 300 guests gathered today at Mechanics Hall to present the YWCA's Katharine F. Erskine Award to five area women who've made a difference in their community.

Many past honorees were present and stood to be acknowledged; the current honorees brought with them to the podium women of their past as well those who seemed to stand beside them to be honored in spirit.

For 2012's arts and culture honoree, Lynne McKenney Lydick, that past spirit comes alive regularly as she portrays 19th-century abolitionist and Worcester resident Abby Kelley Foster in the one-woman play, "Yours for Humanity — Abby."

Ms. Lydick's portrayal, awards committee chairman Stacey DeBoise Luster said, is evidently compelling: her own daughter and many Worcester public school children who've seen Ms. Lydick believe that they have, indeed, met an abolitionist.

Ms. Lydick paid tribute to Ms. Foster with Ms. Foster's own words: " 'Tis great joy to see the world grow better in anything. Indeed, I think endeavors to improve mankind are the only thing worth living for."

"Abby dedicated her life to the same principles to which the YWCA is dedicated," Ms. Lydick said.

She dedicated her award to Ms. Foster as she stood beneath the portrait of her that hangs in Mechanics Hall.

Lawyer Allison Lane, who received the award for her contribution in business and law, spoke of her passion and her leadership of the Girl Scouts. She also paid tribute to a woman who inspired her.

"It never crossed my mind that I could not succeed, thanks to my supporter, my grandmother," Ms. Lane said. "Her favorite advice to me was, 'Get a career where you give the orders, not take them.'"

The YWCA social service and government honoree, Janice B. Yost, president and chief executive of the Health Foundation of Central Massachusetts, paid tribute to many women in the community and in her life.

"Anything noteworthy about my work is a reflection of many lives. As everyone here knows, no one accomplishes anything meaningful by themselves," Ms. Yost said.

Ms. Luster praised Ms. Yost's contribution to expand access to oral health care and taking on other issues not always universally popular, such as the "Housing First" model of addressing adult homelessness.

"People with less courage, less commitment, would have stayed away from that," Ms. Luster said.



Dr. Phyllis Pollack speaks after receiving the 2012 Katharine F. Erskine Award at Mechanics Hall today. The four other award winners are Lynne McKenney Lydick, Allison Lane, Janice Yost, and Melinda Boone, seated left to right. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

Education honoree Melinda J. Boone arrived from Virginia in 2009 to become the first African-American and first woman to be permanent superintendent of Worcester's public schools.

"She was destined to become a force of nature in the field of education," Ms. Luster said of Ms. Boone.

Ms. Boone said leadership was a gift from God, and like Ms. Yost, pointed that she had not and would not be able to do it alone while keeping the focus on education of youth.

"I hope every child in this community recognizes, it's all for them," she said.

Dr. Phyllis Pollack, honored for contributions in medicine and science, praised her teams of supporters, who have enabled her to pursue a career in pediatric cardiology, teach and serve many nonprofits, including the YWCA's Daybreak.

"I really don't know how you find time to do all this," Ms. Luster said.

Dr. Pollack said Worcester was like a vortex that sucks people in: She became involved in many boards and paid tribute to the women who'd encouraged her to become involved.

"I have greatly admired the many accomplished women who preceded me," Dr. Pollack said.

More than 80 Erskine honorees have been chosen by the YWCA awards committee from those nominated by their community since the inception of the awards program 18 years ago.

Mrs. Erskine, whose grandson Matthew Erskine was present to share a story of the woman who inspired many, died in 1990 at the age of

age of 100 after a career spent serving the YWCA and advocating for the empowerment of women. Her grandson shared the story of the time that his grandmother, along with some female friends, tried in 1911 to hear Bull-Moose Party candidate Theodore Roosevelt speak in the very room at Mechanics Hall where the awards in her name are now given.

When the room became too crowded, the women, who at that time could not vote, were all ejected to make room for the men who could vote. That incident helped turn Mrs. Erskine into a suffragist and a champion for the rights of women.