

2007 Athena Awards

By A.J. Caliendo | Photos by James Orr

Traci Lynn McDonald defies the stereotypes in those mean-spirited—but admittedly funny—lawyer jokes. (Come on, you know you’ve told a few.)

McDonald, Washington County Assistant District Attorney and recipient of the 2007 Washington County Athena Award, is a hard-working mother of two who mainly prosecutes defendants who have been indicted on charges associated with domestic or child abuse.

The Athena Award is presented by the Washington County Chamber of Commerce in association with the local chapter of Athena International. The mission of that Chicago-based group is “acknowledging and honoring those quiet leaders, mostly women, whose efforts (are) adding immensely to the fabric of their communities.”

Chamber executive director Jeff Kotula said that the local award nominees and recipients are selected by his organization’s “Women of Wisdom” Committee, following Athena International guidelines, which state that those honored should be individuals (men or women) who, in Kotula’s words, “work to further women’s leadership in the community.”

The theme of the fifth annual Awards ceremony and seminar, held on October 12 at the Hilton Garden Inn at Southpointe, was “Women of Philanthropy.” The list of finalists for the award adhered to that theme of giving and giving back.

Cheryl Hopper owns the Kaleidoscope Consignment Shop. She said that the notification of becoming a finalist “blew me away.” Hopper is also president of the local chapter of Zonta International, a group that, much like Athena, works to advance the status of women.

Sherri Hewitt Laird, owns and operates The Caring Mission, Inc., a company that provides health care for seniors and the disabled, allowing them to stay at home and still get the treatments they need. Hewitt Laird called her Athena nomination “humbling” and said that the honor “means that people appreciate what you do.”

In her presentation, “The Changing Faces of Philanthropy,” keynote speaker Kathleen Buechel pointed out that few of today’s organizations can count solely on the contributions of a single donor, as was the case during the days of Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, et al. Certainly mega-billionaire philanthropists like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet still exist, but “the picture is changing,” Buechel said. One big change is the presence of women at the forefront of major charitable organizations like The Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. Buechel herself was formerly



Traci Lynn McDonald is the recipient of the 2007 Washington County Athena Award



the president of the philanthropic Alcoa Foundation.

Buechel also pointed out that individuals and smaller groups provide much of today's charitable donations. Last year, 75 percent of all gifts came from individuals.

Those gifts often go to community-based organizations to provide services that help solve problems faced by those communities. One such group is the Washington County Literacy Council, whose executive director was also a 2007 Athena Award Finalist.

"I love it. It's my passion," Amy Ross Manko said of heading an organization that helps stamp out illiteracy. Like the other four nominees, Manko was surprised at finding out that she was a finalist, saying, "I just do my thing and apparently somebody noticed."

Being noticed by colleagues, employees or customers is how one gets to be an Athena finalist.

"We solicit nominations from the community," Kotula said.

Those nominations are reviewed by the Women of Wisdom Committee and the finalists and ultimate recipient are selected by a numerical system.

Finalist Donna J. Nardine, for example, was nominated by the organization Women of Southwestern Pennsylvania. Nardine is the executive director of Watchful Shepherd, a group that provides children who are at risk of abuse with electronic devices that alert authorities of immediate danger at the push of a button.

Although McDonald doesn't work for a nonprofit organization or foundation, her contribution to those in need is just as real, with just as much impact. Her job is to take women and the most vulnerable victims of all—children—out of danger.

Still, as gratifying as that job must be, I asked if there were moments when the ADA's own spirits get low, seeing all the tragedy



Keynote speaker Kathleen Beuchel

in her world? "No," she stated emphatically, "because I think God put me here to do this."

Another challenge that the attorney met head on was a recent health issue that she handled with characteristic courage. One day after being diagnosed with the serious heart condition, cardiomyopathy, McDonald found out that she was pregnant. The risk to her life was determined to be serious and, during her 22nd week of pregnancy, doctors advised her to terminate for her own safety.

"I immediately made the decision not to terminate," she said, and a few months later, she gave birth to her second daughter.

The moral of McDonald's story coincides nicely with the message at the Athena seminar and awards ceremony: There are many ways to give. □

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