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Chamber of Commerce awards: Overcoming personal hardship, Heydinger named Person of the Year

NECCA, Learey, Giamartino also are recognized

By Chris Mays, Brattleboro Reformer

BRATTLEBORO — This year's chamber of commerce award recipients know a little about the art of perseverance in the face of challenges — whether systemic, health-related, organizational or financial.

"I just love this Brattleboro community and Windham County," said Nancy Heydinger, executive director of Girls on the Run Vermont. "And I'm so happy to be up here and I'm so happy to be able to have helped 40,000 kids in our state feel more confident and more aware."

Vickie Case, president of the Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce board, called Heydinger "arguably the most agile, most energetic to join the Person of the Year club" in all of the chamber's 64 years of operation at the organization's annual meeting on Thursday. Girls on the Run teaches lessons in physical fitness, promotes healthy self images and inspires community service.

Heydinger was diagnosed with a benign, life-threatening brain tumor; it was removed via surgery in March 2016. But she saved enough energy to compete in the 2017 Boston Marathon, Case said.

"She ran and she conquered," Case said. "She was back."

Heydinger's strength, determination and ability to help young people reach their potential was praised by Case.

Heydinger is "forever dedicating herself to empowering young people," said Peter "Fish" Case, radio personality at WKVT. He noted the importance of such work during the #MeToo movement, a time when women are speaking up about assault and unwanted advances by men in the workplace.

The girls Heydinger works with, she said, are the future of Vermont and "our world."

"I just want them to know they can do whatever they want, they're valued, to speak up," said Heydinger.

New England Center for Circus Arts received the chamber's Member of the Year Award. A large group, including the twin sisters, Elsie Smith and Serenity Smith Forchion, who founded the nonprofit, took photographs with a plaque in a somewhat emotional moment given the challenges of last year.

NECCA opened its state-of-the-art facility on Town Crier Drive in 2017. That same year, Vickie Case said, "gnarly organizational difficulties took the stage, threatening our members' existence."

Last year "was indeed an interesting year for all of us but we know it was an especially challenging year for you," Brattleboro Town Manager Peter Elwell told NECCA representatives.

NECCA "swung into town in 2002," Case said. The organization had been looking for a place and Brattleboro "checked off many of the boxes."

"It didn't take long for them to become part of the arts community," Case said. "It's no secret to anybody in this room today that Brattleboro is all about its kids and nobody is offering kids what [NECCA] is offering."



Winston Prouty Executive Director Chloe Learey accepted the Entrepreneur of the Year award during the Brattleboro Area Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting. Kristoper Radder — Brattleboro Reformer

The chamber named Chloe Learey, executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, Entrepreneur of the Year.

Learey "exemplifies imagination," said Tracey John, chamber board member. "There is nothing expected, nothing predictable. Questions asked are the right ones. They stimulate. They provoke."

John added, "Our entrepreneur is vital ...

visionary ... [and] very determined to do what's best to enrich the lives of our kids and of our community."

Having recently declared her intent to create a coalition on improving childcare in the region, Learey said she believes "we need to all work together."

"This is our town, these are our families, these are our kids," she said. "If we want a thriving economy, we better be part of the answer in terms of providing high quality affordable childcare."

Case called Timothy O'Connor — a Brattleboro resident, town moderator, state legislator, former chamber Person of the Year and past chamber president who died this month — "one of the kindest, nicest guys" who will be remembered as "a true leader and advocate not only for Brattleboro but the state of Vermont."

Plaques also were given out to businesses celebrating anniversaries: New Ground Creative for five years, Southern Vermont Arts & Living publisher Prime Time Concepts for 10 years, Hotel Pharmacy for 35 years, Youth Services for 45 years, Vermont Association of Snow Travelers for 50 years, United Way of Windham County for 60 years, Sam's Outdoor Outfitters for 85 years, Manley Apartments LLC for 100 years, Holton Home for 125 years, Bascom Maple Farms Coombs Family Farm for 165 years, People's United Bank for 175 years and the town of Brattleboro for 265 years.

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