

Honoring she-roes



On March 7, while people around the world prepared to celebrate International Women's Day the next day, members of the local community gathered in Gaiser Student Center to honor five women's contributions to Southwest Washington at the 2019 Iris Awards.

Guests enjoyed refreshments and light fare provided by Beaches Restaurant as they celebrated the honorees. Ceremonies began with a greeting from Clark College President Bob Knight, after which the evening was turned over to emcee Colleen Boccia, chief marketing officer of Columbia Credit Union. Boccia introduced speeches by both the honorees and their nominators.

This year's Iris Award recipients were:

- Ann Fischer, founder of the Healthy Equitable Living Project
- Stacey Graham, president of the Humane Society for Southwest Washington
- Maureen Montague, executive director of Columbia Springs
- Rekah Strong, executive director of Educational Opportunities for Children and Families
- Lynn Valenter, vice chancellor for finance and operations at Washington State University Vancouver

This annual ceremony has a long tradition in this community. The event began in 1985 as a photography exhibit during Women's History Week, which later developed into a larger awards program and ceremony known as the Southwest Washington Women of Achievement Awards. In 2012, the event was reintroduced as the Iris Awards with the same core mission: honoring the women of Southwest Washington for their outstanding contributions in the categories of public, private, philanthropic, and civic service.

Ann Fischer



Ann Fischer and Diane Irby

The evening got off to an emotional start when Diane Irby took to the podium to describe her experience being a client of the Healthy Equitable Living Project, which Ann Fischer runs and founded.

“The pantry has fed my body quite well,” she said. “But the pure unselfish love [Ann] provided me has fed my soul and my heart and was something I didn’t even know I was starving for.

“The pantry keeps me alive,” Irby continued, facing Fischer directly, “but you make me want to stay alive.”

Fischer embraced Irby before beginning her own remarks, which centered on the work that HELP does providing food to families in need at 14 different schools. She spoke about the importance of not just providing people with food and assistance, but doing so in a way that allows them choice and dignity, mentioning how HELP sets up its food pantry so that clients can “shop”

for the groceries they prefer instead of receiving a pre-made box. Fischer also thanked the many volunteers and partners that support HELP, including Clark College nursing students who volunteered to provide clients with education on hygiene and first aid.

Fischer also made clear that it was not just the clients who benefited from HELP, but she herself found inspiration and motivation from the work. "The biggest gift you can give yourself is helping other people," she said.

Stacey Graham



Stacey Graham and Debra Hentz

The next honoree of the evening was Stacey Graham, president of the Humane Society for Southwest Washington. Before coming to HSSW, Graham had a long career that encompassed work in the Oregon State Legislature,

national public relations and advertising agencies, the United Way of Columbia-Willamette, and First Independent Bank. When she joined HSSW in 2013, she was charged with raising the level of awareness and visibility of the Humane Society in the local community and animal welfare industry; and dramatically increasing the save rate of the animals in care. Under her leadership, HSSW launched a five-year, \$6 million capital campaign. In 2018, HSSW was named the Best Nonprofit in Clark County.

“I’ve been a volunteer with HSSW for 20 years,” said nominator Debra Hentz. “One thing you see with people at humane societies is they say, ‘We want to focus on the animals.’ Stacey really focused on the people and building them up.”

Graham admitted that she wasn’t a born animal-lover. “I didn’t grow up with animals,” she said. “The first time I walked into the kennels, I was scared to death—that’s how I learned I was afraid of dogs. But I walked those kennels every day, and I learned to love dogs.”

Graham noted that caring about animals is part of caring about humanity, and noted that HSSW donated pet food to pantries like Ann Fischer’s. “We know how much animals mean to people,” she said. “We know they will give food to their animals before they feed themselves. So we’re hanging in there with you.”

Maureen Montague



Maureen Montague and Heidi Johnson Bixby

The next award presented was the H-RoC Iris Award, a special category created in 2017 to honor women in the community who have promoted civil discourse, teamwork, collaboration, and cooperation. H-RoC, a non-partisan political action committee dedicated to the advancement of elected and appointed female leaders in Southwest Washington, sponsors this annual award.

H-RoC member (and 2016 Iris Award recipient) Heidi Johnson Bixby introduced honoree Maureen Montague. Montague currently serves as the executive director of Columbia Springs, an environmental education nonprofit and protected urban natural area on the Old Evergreen Highway in Vancouver. Previous to this position, she was the co-founder and eventual executive director of

North Bank Artists.

Johnson Bixby described Montague as “the first to raise her hand to volunteer” and someone with a gift for collaboration and community-building.

Like most of the night’s honorees, Montague said she learned the value of community service from her family. She recalled watching her grandmother sewing a quilt with fellow church members to donate to a recently widowed woman to keep her warm during the winter, and feeling “the kindness of that good deed in my heart.”

“Community service, to me, means collective kindness,” she said. “These things add up. ... I’m blessed to live in Clark County, where so many people seem to understand this.”

Rekah Strong



Jada Rupley and Rekah Strong

The next honoree of the night was also nominated by a former honoree. Jada Rupley, 2004 Women of Achievement Award recipient, introduced Rekah Strong by noting that they currently served together on the Clark College Board of Trustees. She praised Strong for her dedication to the community, saying, "Thank you for being a gentle teacher, thank you for being a fierce advocate, and thank you for changing our community."

Strong is executive director of Educational Opportunities for Children and Families. Prior to that position, she served in leadership roles at the United Way of the Columbia-Willamette and at Clark County. Along with her work on the Clark College Board of Trustees, she serves on Clark County's Developmental Disability Advisory Board and is a former board member of We Reign Youth Foundation and Southwest Washington Chapter Red Cross.

Strong spoke about her experiences as a young child attending political events with her grandmother and mother, drawing with crayons and not entirely understanding why she was there, but even so learning the importance of public engagement. "What my grandmother was doing for me was pouring into me, and creating a template for me that would come full circle in my life," she said.

Strong also noted a theme that arose from her experiences: "Small yesses can have huge outcomes." As examples, she offered the time she said yes

to an employee who needed to bring her baby to work, which led to a program that served a dozen employees and became a model for other workplaces. Another “small yes” was agreeing to speak at an open forum about Clark County’s system of governance, which in turn led to her becoming part of the work group that changed the county’s Freeholder process and expanded the Clark County Council.

Strong also recounted providing her own children with crayons as she took them to public meetings—and how, years later, her daughter would volunteer to visit the State Capitol to advocate for others.

“You never know the ultimate outcome of modeling for others, of pouring into other people, and all those small yesses,” she said.

Lynn Valenter



Lynn Valenter and Renee Bartocci

The final honoree of the night was Lynn Valenter, vice chancellor for finance and operations at Washington State University Vancouver.

Valenter, who began her career at WSUV more than 20 years ago, now leads a range of functions including budget and accounting, capital planning, facilities operations, human resources, public safety, and dining services.

Valenter was introduced by WSUV Chief of Staff Renee Bartocci, who expressed her appreciation for her colleague's work ethic and enthusiasm. "She's there to be a partner, to bounce ideas off of, and to ask the hard questions," Bartocci said. "And she's really good at it."

Valenter thanked her family for supporting her work—both in her career and as a volunteer—acknowledging the difficulty women face when they try to manage the obligations of their families with those of their workplaces and communities. "For many, many years, the daily prayer was for balance," she said. Even so, she said the balancing act was worth it.

"I believe each of us finds satisfaction when we make a difference," she said. "That can be in your family, in your work, and in your community."

To view more photos from the event visit our [Flickr page](#).