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Chamber lauds leaders

Educators share the spotlight with stars of business at annual gala.

By Kathleen E. Carey

UPPER DARBY – More than 400 people packed the Drexelbrook Corporate Events Center Thursday night to pay tribute to the exceptional individuals and institutions recognized by the Delaware County Chamber of Commerce for their dedication to education.

Chamber Chairwoman Sally Holub of Main Line Today magazine summed up the night when she said, "Delaware County is rich with educational excellence."

First to be lauded was Chester High Clippers winningest coach Fred Pickett Jr., honored with the Excellence in Educational Leadership Award for his moves on and off the court.

In 1995, he was appointed head coach of the basketball team, after serving as assistant for 10 years. As coach, he has 298 wins and 78 losses and led the Clippers to their fifth PIAA State Championship in 2005.

He was the first Chester coach to have the team capture six consecutive district championships.

In addition, 69 of 79 graduating players have continued their education at an institute of higher learning under his watch.

When Pickett came to the podium, he focused on his team and his city.

"It's really about our kids and our school our city and throughout the world," he said. "We're in this business to educate kids. We're real hard on them but we never give up."

The coach implored audience members to take part in positively changing the city.

"We do need your continued help to help our elected officials to get the job done in the city of Chester," he said.

Delaware County Community College and Penn State Brandywine followed as the Educational Milestone Awardees for this year as both are celebrating their 40th anniversary. The community college began its program with 307 students in Ridley High School. Today, there are almost 27,000 students at 17 locations in Delaware and Chester counties with plans for a Science, Technology, Engineering and Math Complex to open on the main campus in 2009.

Community College President Dr. Jerome Parker urged everyone to combine resources to meet future challenges. "It's going to take all of us ... working as a system (to make certain) our citizens and our communities will survive in an increasing global economy," he said.

The Delaware County campus of Penn State, which recently experienced a name change to Penn State Brandywine, also opened in 1967 in Chester. Three years later, they moved to the campus in Middletown and provide both associates' and baccalaureate degrees there. More than 100,000 students have earned a degree or started their studies at this location with 1,700 students currently enrolled.

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Chancellor Sophia Wisniewska said she treasured the award and what it symbolized.

"Our new name reflects our expanded reach beyond the county boundaries," she said, adding that Penn State's commitment to Delaware County remains entrenched.

Neumann College was highlighted as the chamber's Academic Institution of the Year, having been described as a "Best Value" among Northern colleges by U.S. News & World Report. The Aston college offers 20 undergraduate majors, seven graduate degrees and an accelerated bachelor's degree for adults. It fields 15 NCAA athletic teams, is home to eight performing arts groups and has three new residence halls.

Dr. Rosalie M. Mirenda, Neumann's president, was also appreciative of the award.

"Thank you for this opportunity," she said. "We're greatly privileged to be a part of Delaware County."

The Franklin Mint Federal Credit Union was distinguished as the Business of the Year for its involvement in financial literacy initiatives throughout the community as well as for its commitment to the Delaware County Hi-Q, the nation's longest-running scholastic high school quiz competition.

The credit union's president and CEO, John D. Unangst, as many of the recipients, thanked many and received chuckles for slightly changing the words of Ben Franklin. "A penny saved is a penny earned and you can get 7 percent for savings at the Franklin Mint Federal Credit Union," he said.

Widener University president Dr. James T. Harris III was recognized as the chamber's Citizen of the Year for his loyalty to the college and the city of Chester.

He, like Pickett, focused on the potential of Chester, noting the city for its creativity and ingenuity.

"We can stem the tide of despair and return Chester to its proper place as Delaware County's greatest city," he said.

The 2007 ATHENA Award was Joan K. Richards, president and CEO of the Crozer-Keystone Health System.

This award recognizes a woman leader in Delaware County for professional achievements, community service and efforts to assist other women.

Crozer-Keystone Health System is the county's largest employer with more than 7,100 employees, 78.8 percent of whom are female. "It is an award about giving, giving to a community that you reside in," Ken Kayser of Meissner Chevrolet said. Richards was gracious in her acceptance.

"Success is really what teams of people accomplish," she said.