



Recognition * Education * Achievement * Community Health

SINA 3rd Annual REACH Awards Ceremony

Tuesday, June 9, 2009

Hartford Hospital
Education Resource Center

Program

Masters of Ceremony

Francis Dávila & Aura Alvarado



Greetings from Host Institution

Kevin Kinsella

Vice President

Hartford Hospital



Greetings from SINA

Jane Baird

Chair REACH Committee &

SINA Executive Board member



Dinner



Awards Presentation

Neighborhood Service Awards

Institutional Presentation

Ivan A. Backer Scholarship

Al Mulcahy Scholarship

Melanie Rosado Scholarship

Special Recognition



Closing Remarks



Ivan A. Backer Scholarship

The SINA/Ivan A. Backer Scholarship program was established in 1997 in honor of Ivan Backer, who served as president of SINA for nearly 20 years and who has been one of the driving forces behind the revival of Hartford's Southside neighborhood. The recipients are selected based on service to the community, school and family; as well as far academic achievement. The scholarship consists of three awards of \$4,000 (\$1,000 per year for 4 years) to Bulkeley High School senior students continuing their education at an accredited 4-year postsecondary program.

Ivan A. Backer 2009 Scholarship Recipients



From left to right:
Dorota Panek, Jose Colon, and Racquel Bowen



Al Mulcahy Scholarship

The Al Mulcahy Scholarship Fund provides need and merit based scholarship aid to students from Bulkeley and Hartford high schools boys and girls swim teams. The Al Mulcahy Scholarship honors the spirit of Al Mulcahy, a teacher, coach, mentor, father-figure and friend to hundreds of high school swimmers and student athletes in the Hartford area. This award is presented to those students in the swim teams who have demonstrated a strong work ethic, commitment to academics, and service to their teams, schools or local communities.



Jose Figueroa
Bulkeley High School



Melanie Rosado Scholarship

A caring and loving person, Melanie Rosado's life ended suddenly and tragically on April 15, 1999. She was eighteen years of age and in her senior year at Bulkeley High School. The Melanie Rosado Scholarship Fund was established in honor of her contributions to society, to her school and to her community. This award is presented yearly to students who best exemplify Melanie by maintaining high academic standards and providing community service.



Ariel Agron
Bulkeley High School



Josephine Colon
Bulkeley High School



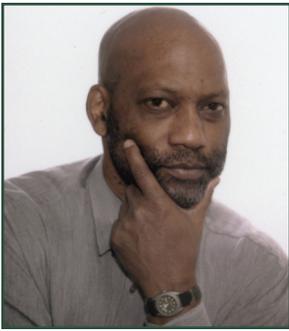
Jose Figueroa
Bulkeley High School



Chastity Flores
Bulkeley High School



Ersal Llakmani
Bulkeley High School



Cornell Lewis

When Cornell Lewis saw drug dealers taking control of his neighborhood, he decided he wasn't just going to stand by and watch. "In the summer of 1992 I put together a coalition of people from the Bellevue Street area to help drive out the gangs 20 Love and Los Solidos," he said. "They were selling drugs and making the community an unfit place to live. For me the last straw was when they tried to rape a lady in plain view at five o'clock in the afternoon. I was able to stop the attack with my own efforts and the help of my dog. After that there was no looking back."

Since that day, Cornell has faced death threats from gang members and even had to move his wife out of the city for a short time. But his courage has never faltered. "All of my community organizing techniques are nonviolent, but I told the gangs that if they were going to come after me, they better be sure to get it right. I have the legal right to do what it takes to defend myself."

Organizing marches in Hartford and disrupting the drug trade by bringing large groups to regular distribution points became hallmarks of Cornell's efforts. But he didn't stop there. "We also wanted to take the fight to the suburbs, where most of the drug dealers' customers live. We would get the addresses of people arrested for purchasing drugs from the police reports and go picket their houses in suburban towns like Glastonbury, Simsbury and Avon."

Cornell also refuses to recognize traditionally accepted divisions in the battle to improve urban areas. "Just because you are black, or a Democrat, does not necessarily mean that you are helping the community. In fact, if your actions contribute to maintaining the status quo, you are hurting Hartford since we need to effect change in order to improve our community."

If you call Cornell on his cell phone, you're likely to get his voice mail. Between his day job working with at-risk youth at the Connecticut Juvenile Training School and his extensive volunteer work, it's rare for him to be able to pick up. The last thing you'll hear him say before the sound of the beep is: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." As Cornell explains, there is calm, well-considered purpose behind his combative-sounding words.

“My way of saving our community is based on the idea that you have to show people that they really can effect public policy change, that we are not just victims,” he said. “But in order to make this strategy work, we can no longer afford to subscribe to the old divisions. If you are for social justice, if those are your true colors, you are with us, whether you are black, white or Latino. Gays, lesbians, feminists, Puerto Rican Nationalists, Muslims, people from the city and the suburbs, North End or South End, we work with them all. It’s all about making the community safer.”

An ordained minister with a B.A. in Urban Mission and Church Growth from Lincoln Christian College in Lincoln, Illinois, Cornell sees his community activism driving his religion, not the other way around. “I have seen many so-called men of faith refuse to work with gay people. Some of the most committed and effective people I know are gay. Why would you want to let religion stand in the way?”

A writer for all three black newspapers in Hartford, Cornell also uses the power of the press to get his message out. A voracious reader and third degree black belt, he transitions with ease from discussing discrepancies between early biblical translations to the importance of the mind-body connection for spiritual health and well-being.

After compiling a “Manual for Making a Safe Neighborhood”, Cornell received national exposure on Dateline NBC and in the New York Times, and was nearly the subject of a movie starring Samuel L. Jackson. Cornell also started the Men of Color Initiative to walk kids to school in unsafe areas, using 100 volunteers equipped with walkie-talkies and binoculars. Another program he initiated is called Food With Dignity.

“I first got to know Cornell through my job,” said Karem Perez-Rivera, Associate Director of Programs at the Hispanic Health Council. “We run an annual health fair, and the whole idea is to make it for all city residents, not just Latinos. Cornell used his newspaper platforms to turn out a noticeable African American presence. It was very evident that they had been well informed because they came with specific questions and requests. But I’ve been equally impressed with his food distribution.”

Cornell explained that many people are reluctant to attend soup kitchens and free food distribution points because of the stigma attached to accepting handouts. “Of course if they are home bound, they don’t have the option to get out. So I thought a good solution would be to deliver quality food, including fresh produce and healthy nutrition, directly to people’s front doors.”



Neighborhood Service Awards Program

The Neighborhood Service Awards recognizes individuals in the community and from SINA Institutions that go beyond the call of duty to promote community service in Hartford.



Noel Casiano

Over the past 11 years, Noel Casiano has served as a DCF Adolescent Social Worker. In that capacity, his co-workers agree, he has been invaluable to local youth.

“Noel is one of the best social workers I have ever encountered in my life,” said Francis Dávila, Community Relations Representative for the DCF Hartford Area Office. “Every kid he deals with gets special attention. There was a young man from El Salvador living in the South End. Who Noel really got to know and went out of his way to help including finding him a job. He was instrumental in turning him around. He was doing all that while working 40 hours a week, doing a 20-hour-a-week internship, and all of his volunteer activities on top of it.”

Noel says he is motivated by a desire to give back to his community. “I was born and raised on Park Street, and one of my first jobs was at Mi Casa. I love this community, but I also know what kids have to go through. Anything I can do to help them stay out of trouble I view as a positive.”

Noel formed a flag football team for kids he works with through DCF. Last year, the team went to a regional competition in Boston and won. “We qualified to go to the World Cup in Panama City, Florida. Unfortunately, we couldn’t go because of a lack of funds, but it was a really great experience for the kids.”

A recipient of the UCONN School of Social Work's Dr. Julio Morales Award, given annually to an outstanding social worker for enriching the lives of Latino youth, Noel graduated in May with a Masters in Marriage and Family Therapy from Central Connecticut State University. He is currently pursuing a PhD in Professional Counseling from Liberty University in Virginia.

In addition to his DCF position, Noel has worked at night for the past two years as a therapist at the Wheeler Clinic in Plainville.

Noel's volunteer work includes coaching basketball for 14- to 18-year-olds in the Sons of Thunder Basketball League at Clark School, as well as managing his own son's baseball team. He is also a Youth Leader at the House of Restoration Church on Main Street. "We have about 100 youth from Hartford involved in our program," said Noel. "We have youth retreats, bible study, recreational activities and we offer counseling."

Last month, Noel was named Clinical Director of the new Counseling Center at his church. "We wanted to provide free services to youth and their families who do not have insurance," said Noel. "We have seven counselors and social workers who volunteer, and all of the operational costs are covered by the church."

Noel also volunteers through his college fraternity, Lambda Theta Phi. They recently did a Park Street cleanup, as well as another cleanup at Parkville Community School.

On a personal note, Noel has a half-brother, Bobby Noel Casiano. For the past seven years, Noel has served as Bobby's foster father. During that time, Bobby has moved from being on the verge of dropping out of high school to graduating as a member of the National Honor Society. In three years he completed three bachelor's degrees and is now, at the age of 22, working on his master's degree. "Noel really turned this kid around. Without him, who knows where he would be today," said Francis.

"I've found that the strongest contribution I can make is through youth," said Noel. "It started out through my job, but I found that the skills I developed there were the same ones that I could use in my volunteer work. Whether it is at DCF, the basketball team or at the church, all of the kids are facing the same issues and need the same kind of attention to deal with their problems and improve their lives."



Benjamin Cruse

Born and bred in Hartford, Benjamin Cruse is a true urban success story. After attending Noah Webster School in the city's West End, he received a scholarship to Kingswood Oxford, a top-level prep school in West Hartford. From there it was on to the Ivy League. Then, after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania, he left the country for a three-year stint in Tobati, Paraguay, where he built and opened a school now attended by 7th through 12th grade students who would otherwise have only limited access to a formal education.

But now Ben, age 26, is back in the city he loves. And it looks as if Hartford doesn't have to worry about losing his strong capabilities and seemingly boundless energy to *brain drain* any time soon. "I'm from Hartford and I've had some incredible educational opportunities. I can't imagine not wanting to give back," he said. "I love this city, and I see myself being here for the rest of my life. I want to help make it a better place."

Although he's only been back a little less than two years, Ben has an impressive list of accomplishments to his credit. As Director of Youth Services at Leadership Greater Hartford, he has been instrumental in implementing and running three programs. The first is called High Hopes, an after school enrichment program at Hartford Public High School. "Before High Hopes, there was nothing after school except interscholastic sports," said Ben. "We currently have a newspaper, a mural arts group, and a collaboration with Hartford Children's Theater and Hartford Stage that led to a student performance last winter."

The second is called Common Ground, a leadership development program for students from Hartford and surrounding towns. Summer Nexus, a two-week leadership development program at Trinity College that Ben got off the ground last year, is the third.

“My biggest beef about Hartford is that there is a lot of stuff for kids to do, but no coordination,” said Ben. “Everyone is fighting for funding, staff and volunteers, and no one is publicizing all of the things that are out there. I wish there was a city-managed effort to provide a catalogue of services, and then to publicize it so every kid in the city would know what’s going on.”

Although his day job is all about helping provide great educational opportunities for local youth, Ben devotes a tremendous amount of volunteer time to the same cause. After five years of dormancy, Ben restarted the Southside Little League last year, renaming it Mike Peters Little League. It grew from 9 teams last year to 290 kids on 19 teams at the beginning of the season this spring. A \$500,000 state grant has been secured to improve the ball fields at Hyland Park.

Jason Rojas, Director of Community Relations at Trinity College, has known Ben since shortly after he returned from Paraguay. “Ben contacted me when he was looking for a place to host the meetings to start the baseball league, and then again when he started the Summer Nexus program,” said Jason. “He’s doing a tremendous job in growing the sports leagues that provide athletic opportunities for Hartford youth. At the same time he’s providing them with phenomenal leadership development opportunities.”

Ben’s father, Victor Cruse, had started a basketball league called Saturday Hoopsters when Ben was a boy. The league fell apart about 15 years ago, but, true to form, Ben got it started up again as well. “Because of my father’s connection, that was actually my first priority,” he said. “Now we have grown to 240 kids at Noah Webster and the Classical Magnet School, and we want to grow it to include two sites in the North End and two sites in the South End.”



Leticia Colon

“My mom was very much my role model,” said Leticia Colon. “She won Childcare Worker of the Year for DCF in 2007. She dedicated her entire adult life to adult and youth education. She sewed blankets for poor children on weekends, cooked healthy meals for sick friends at night, gardened and gave food away, and tutored ESL classes for free. When she died it only seemed right to continue her work. I only hope she’d be proud.”

The same year her mother won the DCF (Department of Children and Families) award, Leticia won the Capital Workforce Partners Star Award. Her mother was too sick to attend the presentation, and then died before the DCF honor could be bestowed. “It was really painful not to have her there because I felt that I had worked so hard to follow in her footsteps,” said Leticia. “Then I accepted the DCF award on her behalf after she died. It was very hard emotionally, but my mother remains a constant source of inspiration for what I do.”

Leticia is Education Coordinator at Hartford Hospital, a position she has held for the past three years. During that time she has implemented three programs: Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language, and computer classes. “I developed them outside of my work role, and once they became successful and showed quantifiable results, they became part of my work role,” she said.

Seeing adults start off taking ESL classes, progress to computer classes, perhaps earning a GED, and then moving on to college has been extremely rewarding for Leticia. “The relationships I have developed with our students have been incredible. Making these positive changes in their lives affects their attitude about everything they do. Not only do they move on to better jobs and better lives, it inspires their family members to do the same.”

Leticia's students have both praise and gratitude for their mentor. "When I met Leticia I was working in the warehouse at Hartford Hospital," said Raymond Ortiz. "Now, thanks to her, I'm a Purchasing Assistant and a student at Capital Community College pursuing a business degree with a major in accounting. She helped me with all of the short-term details to make this possible, since I have a wife and two kids. But she also gave me the long-term vision to make a better life for myself and my family."

Hartford Hospital Vice President Kevin Kinsella says that Leticia is an extremely valuable employee. "I wish we had a hundred of her. The initiative she took in implementing the adult education programs, and more importantly in making them so successful, has been a real inspiration. On top of that, her volunteer activity outside of work is an inspiration to the whole community."

Leticia volunteers as a mentor for incarcerated youth in a program with the Connecticut Ballet. The kids learn dance, drumming and the arts. "When I started, they asked me to develop a way to keep the kids involved after they were released," she said. "I work with them on job skills such as resume writing and interviewing, and pursuing GEDs and college. We meet with them once a week for an hour and show them that we're not going to give up on them."

Leticia is also a writer and illustrator of children's books, with titles such as ButterFly Rhythm, Hip Hop and the Wall, Mrs. Busy Bee, and Pesky Plastic to her credit. She donates copies of her books to Hartford elementary schools, then reads them to the students at school assemblies. "I project the pages of the books onto a screen so the kids can see the pictures while I read the stories."

Recently, Leticia began another volunteer effort called Green Eco-Warriors. She developed a website – www.greenecowarriors.org – and promotes the environmental awareness initiative by speaking to classrooms of elementary students in Hartford and Windsor.

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REACH is sponsored by SINA and its member institutions.
It's mission is to develop, support and recognize individuals who
positively contribute to the growth of the Hartford Community.

