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Fifth annual Business Awards Showcase awards local businesses, young entrepreneurs

Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Businesses that focus on service, ingenuity, sustainability and social awareness were feted Wednesday in a celebration at Baker Boyer Bank.

The fifth annual Business Awards Showcase, presented by Baker Boyer Bank, and produced by the Walla Walla Valley Chamber of Commerce recognized businesses, individuals and nonprofits in eight categories sponsored by various businesses and operations.

The program heralds local operations and their efforts toward the economy, service and an entrepreneurial spirit. About 100 people packed the downtown lobby of Baker Boyer for the evening's banquet.

Winners and their categories are:

Catalyst Award: Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

The award, sponsored by Alaska Airlines, recognizes an individual, business or organization that collaborates and motivates to make big things happen in the Walla Walla Valley.

The newspaper's coverage has helped inspire everything from volunteerism to community movements through news coverage on issues involving everything from proposed job cuts at the Washington State Penitentiary to increasing gang activity across the Walla Walla Valley.

Other nominee: Home Loan Center.

Health & Wellness Award: YMCA

The award, sponsored by Walla Walla General Hospital, recognizes a business for outstanding commitment to employee wellness and development in the workplace.

The Walla Walla YMCA has an all-time high of 7,000 members with a philosophy that the healthier the community is, the healthier its workforce is. Staff development is key to the agency's long-term success, YMCA officials say.

Other nominee: None.

Business of the Year Award: Columbia Rural Electric Association

The award, sponsored by the Port of Walla Walla, recognizes a business for its contribution to the community.

The company, incorporated in 1939 by 72 farmers, began as a way to serve rural residents and has since grown to 51 employees and 4,800 accounts. Earlier this year, the electric co-op announced plans to purchase the former Key Technology building on Melrose Street from the Port for about \$5.3 million.

Other nominees: Gesa Credit Union, Grassi Refrigeration and Wildhorse Resort & Casino.

Not For Profit of the Year Award: Walla Walla Community Hospice

The award, sponsored by Hayden Homes, recognizes best business practices in a 501c(3), 501c(4) or 501c(6) of any size.

Walla Walla Community Hospice provides end-of-life care and support with a focus on quality of life and patient dignity.

Other nominee: Blue Mountain Land Trust.

Sweet Service Award: Walla Walla's Harvest Foods

The award, sponsored by Sykes, recognizes a business or nonprofit with exceptional customer service through all aspects of sales.

The locally owned supermarket traces its history to the 1950s when it was established as having a focus on friendly personal service for the community. Now a 55-employee store, its motto is "Big Enough to Serve You, Small Enough to Care!"

Other nominees: Marcus Whitman Hotel & Conference Center, Oil Can Henry's and Simmons Insurance Group.

Smart Business Partner Award (Large category): Walla Walla Community College

The award, sponsored by Smart Business Partners, recognizes large and small operations that practice outstanding commitment to environmentally sound business practices.

Located on 100 acres, the school has become an educational and cultural center that emphasizes conserving resources. It works with organizations involved with environmental restoration, and its water management program is under contract to offer drought mitigation workshops and perform irrigation efficiency studies throughout the state. It's also developing a \$2 million Water and Environmental Center, among numerous other efforts to conserve resources.

Other nominees: Walla Walla Public Schools Facilities Support and Washington State Penitentiary.

Smart Business Partner Award (Small category): Copier Service Inc.

Copier Service, a locally owned and operated copy, print and office equipment sales and repair shop, has committed to using environmentally sound practices in its daily operation. Those include energy efficient lighting, light sensors in the office and purchasing recycled content paper, among other things.

Other nominees: Downtown Walla Walla Foundation, Singer's Chevron and the Walla Walla Senior Citizens Center.

Youth Entrepreneur of the Year Award

The award recognizes young people who organize and manage their own small businesses and who demonstrate excellent customer service.

First place: Jessica-Ann McGuire, a 15-year-old who grew her love for selling herbs at the Walla Walla Valley Farmers Market into a full-fledged business. She and her mom have leased property from Locati Farms over the last two years. The fruits of her labor have been sold at market. She is saving her profits for college, where she plans to study plant genetics and, perhaps, agronomy.

Second place: Allison Wanichek, a 10-year-old who turned her own battle with juvenile arthritis into a fundraising opportunity with an entrepreneurial lemonade stand. She raised \$3,000 in July for the Arthritis Foundation's Juvenile Arthritis camp called KAT-FISH (Kids and Teens' Families Investing Support and Hope).

Third place: Samantha and Tristan Case, who run "Time to Eat" at the Farmers Market. The two make omelets with the farm-fresh eggs from their farm, Chicken Chore Treasures, and smoothies.

Other nominees: Jared, Ethan and Summer Kelnhofner, who make greeting cards under the name 3Inklings Cards and sell them at the Farmers Market; and William Waliser, a 13-year-old who started a business growing and selling worms at the Farmers Market.