



Business standouts honored at Celebrate Salem event

By Lisa Guerriero/salem@cnc.com
GateHouse Media
Fri May 04, 2007, 01:21 PM EDT

Salem - It was sort of like Oscar night, only instead of the film industry, it was the best and brightest of the Salem business community that was feted Wednesday night. Top-class catering in a stunning venue? Check. One-of-a-kind award statues? Check.

The Chamber of Commerce hosted the 85th Celebrate Salem awards beneath the glass ceiling of the Peabody Essex Museum's atrium.

"Your being here demonstrates the Salem Chamber is a strong ... organization," Chamber President Patrick DeIulis told the several hundred people who congregated for cocktails, dinner and the awards.

Some 600 chamber members collaborated to narrow down the city's outstanding businesses for 2006, selecting 36 nominees for 2006 for the six categories of Businessman of the Year, Businesswoman of the Year, Long-term Achievement Award, Community Service Award, Excellence in Retail and New Business of the Year.

The nominees ranged from larger businesses like the Bioengineering Group to smaller places like Salem Cycle, Quint Essentials, A & J King Artisan Bakery and Fiddlehead flowers.

Mayor Kim Driscoll addressed the city's business growth and how, although the downtown revitalization is a focus, areas like Swampscott Road and Highland Avenue are increasingly important. Encouraging business is crucial to the public sector, she said, which is why officials didn't shift the tax burden to commercial enterprises during recent city budget troubles.

"Gone are the days when the chamber and the city were at odds," said Driscoll.

Event chairman Sandy Heaphy and Diana Moreno addressed the crowd briefly before Jay Finney, a chamber member from the Peabody Essex Museum, spoke about the museum hosting the event for the second year. This year's theme was "Navigating the Imagination," to coincide with the landmark new exhibit of Joseph Cornell's artwork.

Then chamber's executive director, Rinus Oosthoek, and past president Juli Lederhaus, presented most of the awards.

Each winner received a personalized certificate and glass figure of a sailboat on water, from a custom-made, exclusive line of pieces called "Salem Sail," created by John Valpacchio, director of the GlassWorks Studio at Salem State College.

Robert Dionne of Northshore Ambulance took home the Businessman of the Year honors, while Wendy Snow-Lang won for Businesswoman of the Year. Both owners are active in the community, as well as operating locally focused enterprises.

The new business award drew 20 nominees this year, which the event organizers said indicates the healthy commercial growth in the city. The winner in the hotly contested category was Bill Walker, operator of the Salem Ferry.

Over dinner, Walker said the second season is expected to surpass even last year's successful launch, with additional

promotion and marketing in Boston and Salem. A re-naming ceremony for the ferry will be held later this month to coincide with the start of the season.

The Long-term Achievement Award went to Red's Sandwich Shop, much to the surprise and delight of Arthur and Mary Drivas, who accepted the honor for their son John Drivas, the owner, who was away on business. The win prompted many attendees, including state Rep. John Keenan, Fred Davis of the Plummer Home and Biff Michaud of the Salem Witch Museum to debate who might have eaten the most sandwiches from Red's over the years.

Rep. Keenan presented the Community Service Award, but first took a moment to praise the city's business and government leaders.

"I think you'd be hard-pressed to find another venue like this in the state ... or even the country," Keenan said, noting that he's somewhat shameless in promoting his hometown when he's working in Boston. "I'm a walking salesman up at the State House."

Keenan himself was praised earlier in the night for ushering along the courthouse renovation and wharf revival projects, both seen as key to the city's economic development.

He happily presented the community service award to CinemaSalem. Among other efforts, CinemaSalem and theater manager Paul Van Ness have begun allocating a portion of ticket sales to fund community grants that are given to worthy local nonprofits each month — usually \$1,000 to \$1,500 each.

The last honor, Excellence in Retail, was bestowed on Cornerstone Books, accepted by owner Gil Pili. A downtown favorite, the shop has a seemingly endless schedule of activities and programs, many of which are free to the public. It also offers its space up to several local groups.

Despite the networking encouraged by the chamber over the course of the year, the winners were kept thoroughly confidential until they were announced. Wendy Snow-Lang, for example, expressed certainty that she wouldn't win her category right up through dinner — and she looked shocked when her name was announced for Businesswoman of the Year.

Those who weren't nominated still enjoyed the cocktails and dinner, plus a parting gift of treats from Jacqueline's Gourmet Cookies. There was one other surprise to be had: Valpacchio, the master glassblower from GlassWorks, also created unique centerpieces — detailed, ornate glass roses that were given out at the end of the night to the woman at the table whose birthday was closest to May.

Award sponsors included DeIulis Brothers Construction, Dominion, Eastern Bank, North Shore Medical Center, Peabody Essex Museum and Salem Five bank. For information, call the Chamber of Commerce at 978-744-0004 or visit www.salem-chamber.org.