Many ways to make a difference

Times*Ledger* honors 5 from boro with Community Service Awards

By Stephen Stirling
Wednesday, March 11, 2009 4:37 PM EDT

Community Impact Awards presenter Curtis Sliwa (c.) congratulates honorees (l. to r.) Corey Bearak, Susan Deutsch of York College Foundation Board accepting on behalf of Marcia Keizs, Helen Marshall and Carlisle Towery at the awards breakfast. Photo by Christina Santucci.

TimesLedger Newspapers honored five Queens leaders Tuesday as part of its Queens Community Service Awards, which annually acknowledges individuals who make a difference in the borough's diverse communities.

In an event moderated by Guardian Angels founder Curtis Sliwa, Borough President Helen Marshall, civic organizer Corey Bearak, Greater Jamaica Development Corp. President Carlisle Towery, York College President Marcia Keizs and City Councilman John Liu (D−Flushing) were saluted for what TimesLedger Editor Roz Liston called "tapping into their own rich personal histories" to promote positive change in Queens.

At the event, held at News Corp.'s Manhattan headquarters, Sliwa said as a community organizer himself it was easy for him to understand the sacrifice it takes to be a strong leader in a network of tight−knit neighborhoods like Queens.

"I've busted my shoes in many hard neighborhoods and let me tell you that's heavy lifting," said Sliwa, who grew up in southern Queens under the shadow of the A train.

Sliwa also applauded the efforts of community newspapers in the borough, which he said are often the only reliable sources of news at the local level.

"I go into Queens and I come out with a rotator cuff problem. I'm carrying six, seven, eight newspapers," he said. "Where else are people who are well−connected going to get that information? They go to the weekly community newspapers."

The third annual Community Service Awards reception was hosted by Community Newspaper Group President Les Goodstein and sponsored by Con Edison and Elmhurst Dairy.

Marshall, who overcame long odds growing up in the Bronx after she and her sister were orphaned to become a political leader in Queens, said perseverance in the face of adversity has unlocked a life better than she could have imagined as a child.

"When they say to you that it's impossible, pursue it because you can achieve it," she said.

Sliwa praised Bearak, a Hofstra Law School Graduate and founder of the Queens Civic Congress, for his role in helping to transform part of the land at Creedmoor Psychiatric Center in Glen Oaks into a campus for three public schools.

"What really struck me about Corey was that he was able to bring so much positive energy to a place that had so much negative energy," Sliwa said.

Bearak was humbled by the award.

"In many ways I'm accepting this award not just for myself, but for the many people I've worked with over the years," he said.

Towery was honored for his work with the Greater Jamaica Development Corp., which has had a major role in pulling central Jamaica out of the commercial crisis it faced in the 1960s and '70s by promoting the new services, businesses and infrastructure plans that have turned the community into a vibrant area.

"Carlisle helped bring that downtown back from destruction, back from total disintegration," Sliwa said.

"Jamaica is a downtown on the way up," Towery said. "We have strived to be the glue that collectively brought and kept people together."

Keizs and Liu were also honored. Sliwa praised Keizs for her work to elevate York College to become one of the most respected educational institutions in the city and called Liu an inspirational leader of the burgeoning Asian−American population in Queens and the city.

TimesLedger Newspapers is part of the Community Newspaper Group, which is owned by News Corp.

Reach reporter Stephen Stirling by e−mail at sstirling@timesledger.com or by phone at 718−229−0300, Ext. 138.